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THE DEADLY CRUSADER PURSUES A MASTER TERRORIST AND MAKES A MAFIA MINX AN OFFER SHE CAN'T REFUSE

HAWK #6

THE SEEDS OF EVIL

BY DAN STREIB

***"YOU SAVED MY LIFE,"* Hawk said again.**

He meant to kiss her softly on the lips, but when they touched the warmth between them became a spark.

They had shared harrowing moments, he thought. Now, as they stood in the isolated house, they felt instant closeness created by the intensity of the past few hours.

He doubted that he would escape Venice before he killed or was killed himself. But for these moments he needed Regina Tirelli.

"I . . ." she started to say.

Her voice was lost in the gentle, exploratory pressure of his lips on hers. Their bodies were coming together in slow motion; their nearness was an aphrodisiac.

He kissed her on the soft curve of her neck, and the front of her robe fell open . . .

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DAN STREIB

HAWK

THE SEEDS OF EVIL

A JOVE BOOK

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PROLOGUE

Berlin, Germany

April 26, 1945

The azure blue of a spring morning sky succumbed to the black and gray of burning buildings.

Voracious fires devoured block after block of schools, factories, churches, theaters, and hospitals. The appetite of the flames was as undiscriminating as it was insatiable; it consumed structures the way a starving mob might attack a smorgasbord of delicacies.

Exhausted fire fighters retreated in defeat. Broken water mains had reduced the output of fire hoses to a trickle. At the vortex of the fires nothing lived.

Banks of debris lined the streets on both sides. Between the piles of rubble were the dust-caked bodies of the dead, many with their arms raised above their heads, a position of surrender they had assumed after being dragged from the wreckage by their feet.

Death had played no favorites.

There were males (some old, some boys as young as fourteen from the Hitler Youth Corps), women, children, and infants.

Above them, from lampposts and from trees—trees stripped of small branches and split down the main trunks as if struck by the lightning fury of the heavens—hung more bodies.

Most of these were in uniform. On many, decorations gleamed beneath their great trench coats. Their necks were cocked at forty-five-degree angles where the rope had cracked their bones and cut off the air supply to their lungs. Crude signs dangled from some of the bodies: "Traitors"; "Cowards."

These were the labels left by the "flying military courts," a gaggle of gestapo, security troops, MPs, and ordinary police who had been unleashed as the last of the exits from the city were closed by the encircling Russians.

Arbitrarily the madmen had executed anyone who no longer understood the senseless resistance. They slaughtered, too, anyone who was unfortunate enough to be around when the lynch men thought they needed to terrorize a given section of the city into continuing the hopeless battle.

Underground in the subways were more corpses. These were bloated with water in the lungs. Wounded, aged, or otherwise helpless, thousands had huddled in the dark passages for days. They had been dying of disease and thirst as the shells smashed the Nazi capital in the *Goetterdaemmerung*, this twilight of the Aryan gods. The mythical death of the pagan German deities as celebrated in the turgid operas of Richard Wagner was becoming reality. Then the invading enemy had taken to using the subways to tunnel in behind the feeble defenders on the surface.

The leader the Germans had cheered for years had shown his lack of compassion for his own people, his obliquity of conscience. He had ordered the opening of the locks to the Spree. The bloodstained river water flooded the sanctuaries to the south of the Reich Chancellery. The death of his own followers was of no consequence to the man who issued orders from beneath the earth, delaying his own inevitable death or capture at any cost.

Under Russian shelling, many drones, dying or bleeding, worked feverishly to clear debris on the surface. They chopped down trees and removed lampposts along the east-west thoroughfare on both sides of the once proud Victory Tower. The *Siegessäule* in the Third Reich's crumbling sand castle was being deliberately leveled. Workmen were building a landing strip for aircraft. Tempelhof and Gatow airfields were either in enemy hands or inoperable under the fierce artillery barrage.

Miraculously in a city that had become a stone quarry, the

telephone system still functioned to a degree, and the word spread to those scratching a landing strip from the littered thoroughfare. The Führer's commands were still being obeyed outside the capital. Two transport aircraft were heading through the storm of antiaircraft fire and interceptors toward the makeshift airfield—Junkers 52.

The basic German transport had started life as a trimotor passenger liner more than a dozen years earlier for Lufthansa, the German national airline. They were unarmed planes with corrugated metal fuselages, square sturdy wings, and cowlings on the single blade engines.

JU-52's had carried paratroopers in the victorious days when the blitzkrieg overran Europe and northern Africa.

Two still survived. They were headed for the center of the city. For the street converted to a runway.

There, in the stench of smoke and death, Hans Steiner of the *Volkssturm*, the aged and poorly armed home guard, stood looking in the direction of the Reich Chancellery. Even a shell exploding with a roar that left him temporarily deaf and powdered him with new dust and ashes could not keep him from thinking what the aircraft meant.

The transports were bringing in ammunition, he understood. But what could two aircraft deliver that would affect the outcome of the war any more than a leaf fallen from a tree could alter the course of a river? Messerschmitt 109's had been dropping hundreds of supply canisters on the beleaguered city all morning, but only a few containers could be found in the ashes.

Why bring in two more loads of ammunition that could not but prolong the agony for an extra hour?

It is not what the Junkers bring in, Steiner told himself. It is what they take out. Who they take out.

Bitterly he wondered: would the ghouls finally emerge from their underground bunkers to chance the daylight and the hell of battle long enough to make a run for the aircraft?

Was the Führer finally deserting the city? Hitler and his henchmen had brought the fires of Armageddon down upon the people, the fires that had claimed Steiner's children, crippled his wife, and separated him from all others he knew.

His gun with its old hunting scope on top lay against a stump of a tree. Several shells remained in its belly.

He moved to it, picked up the weapon, then disappeared

through the arch that had once been a doorway to a massive public building. He lay on his stomach and positioned the rifle so it aimed toward the point where the aircraft would stop. It was the only area partially protected by teetering stone walls from the intermittent shelling. From his position Steiner could fire his last rounds on anyone who boarded the Junkers if he chose.

Hitler would never live to make the last desperate attempt at escape.

This Hans Steiner swore.

Then, through the rumble of far-off explosions, the crackling of the unchecked fires pouring plumes of dark smoke into the spring sky, and the roar of bursting shells nearby, the soft drone of aircraft engines at a distance became a cat's purr of satisfaction.

Men with unwashed faces stopped their work. They looked up for the first time in weeks.

Hope lit eyes waxen with despair. Steiner's too. Those who still had watches checked them. It was time.

The planes could be the Junkers. Above the steeples of ragged walls the survivors saw the low-flying aircraft.

A faint cheer rose from the men in the street. Some waved their tired arms. A senseless wave of exhilaration crackled among the workers. Through some savage form of dialectic they found a victory in the approach of the JU-52's, although the planes could carry out no more than a symbolic few of the dying.

The planes meant there was still a world beyond the doughnut of steel closing in on them. There was a place that a man did not have to fight his neighbors in the cellars for a can of food, a place where water flowed from faucets or could be pumped from wells.

The Junkers came in one behind the other. Geometric puffs of antiaircraft fire blossomed around them. Fingers of tracer bullets arched toward them. The old squared-off aircraft wobbled, dropped, and rose, knocked about by the explosions around them and the changing air currents rising from a city in the midst of cremation.

Finally both aircraft settled toward the stripped thoroughfare. Their wheels nearly touched the spikes of ruins at the far end of the makeshift field. Their wings crowded between facades of structures not completely flattened.

The planes touched down on the broken concrete, but neither bounced. The pilots used every inch of space provided. They applied the squealing brakes and cut the engines, forcing their eyes not to look ahead. They didn't want to think of the wall of wreckage to the front. It didn't matter. There would be no trying to climb again if the runway proved too short. There was no staying in the shrapnel-filled sky. The only hope was to reach the cover provided at the far end of the street.

The aircraft slowed to a stop just short of the barricades.

Before the side doors could open, cadaverous men closed in on both planes. A tall blond man in a clean Luftwaffe uniform came down the steps. Captain Burgdorf looked about at the rubble that had been Berlin—once a beautiful woman grown ugly with the cachexia of age. No one crawled into the aircraft to begin the frantic unloading until he had walked the few steps to the battered staff car that had come to meet him.

Once inside the unworthy vehicle he dusted his trousers with his hands, then wiped his palms together, holding his arms to his side so none of the ashes of defeat would fall on his polished boots.

The pilot of the second JU-52 stayed aboard to help with the unloading. His own uniform was a mix and match of pieces from dead fliers and dead SS troops.

Flying Officer Burgdorf kept his eyes straight to the front as the staff car limped along and wove a serpentine path through the canals between the stacks of stone. His displeasure with the driver's unpressed, soiled uniform occupied his thoughts. He hardly heard the bombs chipping at the city or noticed the furtive figures occasionally darting from one cellar to the protection of another hole. The lifelessness of the streets concealed the truth: more than two million soldiers and civilians were trapped inside the tightening ring.

By the time the vehicle reached the Wilhelmsplatz, the sounds of battle had grown muffled and distant. Turning on to the Vosstrasse, the car neared the spacious Reich Chancellery, still proud and determined against the morning sky.

Dem deutschen Volke.

The words, "To the German people," were visible above the five towering pillars at the top of the broad stone steps, but letters had been obliterated by shrapnel. The dome remained intact although the glass had been shattered.

The great Nazi eagle had fallen.

It lay like the corpses, on its back, wings spread and still.

Much of the artistic facade had been cracked and had dropped away, revealing the plain backing walls. Parts of the belligerent regime's towering, sprawling symbol of might were as barren as a crypt.

Burgdorf forced his thoughts away from the damaged structure. He remained rigid when the dull thump of a shell striking the far side of the building shook the ground beneath his vehicle.

He was undaunted by the shellfire. He had faced death so often that it held no meaning for him. Defiance of danger became his last remaining credo.

When he saw the rubble lying in front of the party entrance to the bunkers below, he bristled with anger.

He clenched his fists when the driver did not stop at the front of the chancellery but continued around to the garden side.

"Pigs," he said with heraldic stiffness. "Worms."

The boorish supreme leaders had taken to living in holes. They thought they could continue orchestrating the holocaust from the safety of warrens in the earth. They were not even going to venture up the chancellery passageway to meet him.

Another shell hissed and exploded near the Potsdamer Platz.

The vehicle stopped at the military door to the bunkers. The sky glowed red above.

The silent driver deserted the staff car and ran to the entry. He disappeared inside.

Burgdorf was alone.

He climbed out and stood still. If he had not seen the driver and the men shuffling out to unload his aircraft, he could have been standing alone in the midst of Maya ruins or the remains of Pompeii. There was not even a sentry outside the bunker.

The airman went far down littered steps into the cement-walled caverns before he found the first guards huddled in the darkness.

An SS man appeared in the light from the ill-fitting steel doors the pilot had come through. Some of the SS breed's arrogance remained as he demanded Burgdorf's identification in a clipped, monotonic directness.

Stubbornly the Luftwaffe captain refused to show the orders he carried folded in his pocket.

"Take me to the Führer," he commanded. Burgdorf had grown wise to the slightest nuances of SS bullying bluffs. He no longer bent before their once fearful ambiguities. They now bent to him.

The SS officer acquiesced. He lacked the spirit to defy the regular military. His greatest fear was that he would be ordered from the bunker and into the battle raging above. So he led the way into the interior of the massive shelter.

Deeper in there were lights. They were dim dust-covered globes that could not illuminate the entire passageway, so only the top halves of the soldiers leaning against the concrete walls were clearly visible. Among the dark lumps were men asleep in a sitting position. Voices were hushed or muffled by the walls.

The air was foul and dank. Cigarette smoke wafted into Burgdorf's nostrils, mingling with the smell of urine and human defecation. Ventilating shafts hummed in the ceiling. The air sucked in only added to the stench.

He was in a tomb instead of the headquarters for a nation at war. He recognized that no one continued to choreograph the Wagnerian opera of world conquest. The battle was over. Only useless dying continued.

Eventually his guide led the captain through the headquarters of the Adolf Volunteer Youth Corps.

Another SS officer was pinning the Iron Cross on the breast of a boy. The child's blond hair was uncombed and fell across his forehead. His eyes were tearful, his face dirty. His oversized coat hung from narrow shoulders like a cape.

Burgdorf could not resist. "Now children fight while men cower in holes?" he asked, his voice tough and metallic.

The second SS officer, his uniform neat except for the dust that sifted from the ceiling whenever a shell struck nearby, had no strength to quarrel with the insult although he outranked the flier. "The boy killed a dozen Communist pigs this morning," he said.

"And how many boys did the Communist pigs kill?" the flier asked.

Irony was fate's favorite game, Burgdorf mused.

The man in the youth headquarters grunted. His eyes had defocused. His expression was void. He put his arm around

the boy's shoulders and led him off in the direction from which Burgdorf had come.

"My God!" the flier breathed. "You're sending him back into that hell?"

The guide had continued down another passageway. The pilot had little choice except to follow.

Every room was cold, austere, and musty. As they went deeper, the floors trembled beneath their feet but the sounds of shelling were more muffled.

They passed through a maze of rooms, each connected to one or more of the others by open passages or steel doors. They saw only a few of the sixty chambers, but each was furnished no better than a monastic cell. In most, men worked over maps. Some rooms were storehouses, packed to the ceiling with food, liquor, and other supplies.

Burgdorf, who rarely felt compassion about anything or anybody, was remembering the gaunt skeletons he had seen unloading his aircraft. If they knew that food and water such as this were buried with their leader, would they have stormed the bunker like barbarians? He doubted it. They had gone to war with hysterical fanaticism; now they starved with fanatic devotion. The last crust of bread must be left for Hitler, they reasoned, so he would have strength to lead them mystically to ultimate victory.

"Not my worry," he said aloud to himself.

His guide glanced over his shoulder, wondering if he had been addressed.

They passed other rooms filled with limp, waiting soldiers. Waiting for what? The inevitable end? The last battle in the sewers of the Third Reich?

Burgdorf urged his guide on faster. He wanted to escape these holes as soon as possible. He would die above ground, preferably in the air where he felt free like a bird even while the shotgun burst of ack-ack fire peppered his aircraft.

Another tier deeper into the catacombs they passed through several doors before entering a different atmosphere.

In one room he recognized Frau Magda Goebbels and her children. They were playing like children did everywhere. They were clean, well fed, and neatly dressed.

Coming into the quarters was Goebbels, a gaunt, pale man. His cheeks were as hollowed as those of an octogenarian. He watched the Luftwaffe officer pass, his eyes revealing a

frantic but controlled disquiet. The pilot wondered if the man was thinking of his children and the fate he was forcing upon them.

Burgdorf recognized Reichsleiter Martin Bormann through the opening to another chamber.

Laughter and music came from a few steps up. In that sparsely furnished cubicle generals and lesser officers were seated around a table drinking beer, wine, and brandy. They fondled secretaries, some with their hair in disarray and their clothes askew. The table was filled with trays of sandwiches. The aroma of real coffee briefly overpowered the suffocating air.

The faces inside turned grim when they saw the newcomer passing by. Burgdorf reminded them about what they were celebrating.

Between five hundred and a thousand people must be living in the tomb, the flier thought as he took the last steps down into a guarded room.

At the next checkpoint the guide made explanations and photographs were compared with the flier's face. Then the door slid open.

Alone he passed through into another long corridor. No one even suggested taking the Luger he wore in a holster on his hip. There was another guard, another passage, and finally a door with no one about.

The pilot rapped firmly and waited at attention.

Someone spoke from inside. He couldn't hear, but he answered the obvious.

"Captain Burgdorf," he said.

An eye filled a peephole before him. He stood directly in front of it so he was clearly visible.

Eventually the door swung open. A nurse in a crisp white uniform stepped aside to let him enter. The room was as moldy and uninviting as the others except that a couch and two overstuffed chairs were placed on both sides of an area rug. On the walls were several small paintings. He recognized them from his childhood schooling. Masterpieces from the museums of France.

Then he saw the dog, a well fed, well groomed Alsatian with four puppies sucking at her teats.

The dog growled menacingly, and a woman spoke from the couch.

"Quiet, Blondi, quiet."

The ventilators had drawn the smell of sulfur this deep into the bowels of the German earth. Limestone dust sprinkled the floor and furniture. Smoke formed a thin cloud about the ceiling.

Burgdorf had to squint to see the woman on the couch. She wore a gray suit that fit tightly over her slender, sensuous body. Her shoes were new; expensive jewelry adorned her neck and wrist.

His first impression was attraction; but she was too affected and theatrical for his taste.

Eva Braun, he said to himself. After all these years he had finally met his Führer's mistress.

She did not speak to him, and his attention was so fixed on her that he did not immediately realize Adolf Hitler was rising to meet him from one of the overstuffed chairs.

The captain's heart thumped, then quieted with disappointment. His salute started out sharp and crisp, but his hand went limp before he lowered his arm.

The leader rose painfully. His military jacket was soiled by driblets of food. His lips were sunken, the mouth of a sick old man. His face had grayed to a loamy texture. His hand scrubbed his moustache nervously.

He shuffled forward a few steps, throwing his torso ahead and dragging his feet after him. His back was bowed, his body feeble. He extended his hand and Burgdorf took it. The handshake was weak, as if the bones inside the flesh had turned to rubber. The old man's left arm hung limply at his side, the hand trembling noticeably.

". . . Reichmarschall Hermann Göring, a traitor . . ." He was rambling in a thin, sick voice. "Wenck's army fails me. They all fail me."

"My Führer," the airman said, hoping to stop the embarrassing outburst that had nothing to do with him.

"But the Youth Corps. Ah, the Youth Corps," Hitler continued. "The boys, they hold the Spandau bridges over the Havel at Pichelsberg. The young! There is our hope. We shall have ultimate victory. Have you heard? Already our enemies quarrel among themselves over the spoils. They shall end up battling each other. The Third Reich will survive when our enemies meet and fight."

"Yes, my Führer," the young air officer said. He felt his

chest cave in beneath a new weight as Hitler's eyes stared at him without seeing. The old flicker was gone. He lifted his hand in a minimal gesture of futility. His features were flaccid. He was nothing more than an old man, his head shaking with palsy.

It was all over, Burgdorf admitted. Berlin would fall to the Russians in a final purge of slaughter. The German forces fighting in pockets throughout parts of Germany and Italy would succumb in a matter of days.

"You understand your orders?" Eva Braun asked.

"Yes, Fräulein Braun." He welcomed the chance to face away from Hitler.

"The man who passed the orders to you is dead," she added. Three fingers pressed briefly against her eyes. "No one beyond this room knows your destination."

Burgdorf shivered. The man who had brought him the order to fly into Berlin and report to Hitler had been a friend.

Now he was dead.

"How . . . how was he killed?" He could not resist the question.

The woman on the couch ignored him.

The nurse had gone into another room. When she returned, she carried a cardboard box with the top partially open. It did not appear to be heavy, but its size made it awkward for a woman in her fifties. When Burgdorf made a move to take it from her, she turned away silently. Emphatically she refused his assistance.

Medicines, he told himself, or money to be stashed away somewhere safe.

"You understand, once you take off, Frau Schwein is to be your only passenger?" Eva Braun asked.

No, he had not known that, but he nodded obediently.

"Your second pilot has been told this," she said.

He nodded again.

"Then there is nothing more to be said except you must realize only one pilot is needed for this mission."

The implications of her last statement chilled him further, but he did not consider disobeying.

Frau Schwein swished to the couch as if to offer the box to the leader's mistress, but Eva Braun responded flatly.

"Go," she said.

Only then did he realize Adolf Hitler was screaming behind him. His raving was beyond interpretation.

Eva Braun left the couch. She strutted across the room, opened a second door, and held it for him. He was obviously not going out the way he had entered.

Burgdorf saluted, clicked his heels, and exited. The nurse trailed him.

They walked through a bedroom and into what appeared to be a closet. At the rear a door stood open. He kept moving until he was walking through a long passage where few lights flickered. The floor slanted upward. With every ten yards the sounds of shelling grew louder. The floor quaked. Parts of the ceiling began falling ahead of them.

He wanted to run, but the older woman could go no faster. Eventually they came out inside the Reich Chancellery. The building swayed. Glass and plaster rained down on the massive auditorium where the rows of seats had stood before they had been torn loose from their moorings and chopped to pieces for firewood.

Outdoors, the world had gone mad.

The sky still had patches of spring blue, but it was streaked with the spears of exploding shells and new columns of smoke. Fires raged close enough to warm the morning air. Shells hissed, shrieked, roared. Stones fell like stinging hail.

Burgdorf ran, forgetting the woman. He had gone around to the military entrance and was climbing into the car before a break in the clamor allowed him to hear her angry shouts. He had the motor running when she climbed into the rear seat.

He had no intention of searching out the driver although he knew the main throughfares were blocked and he would have to find his way back to the Siegessäule along roundabout routes.

As he steered through the shattered city, he tried in vain not to reason.

Why hadn't the Führer and Eva Braun, possibly Goebbels and Bormann, come with him too? Couldn't they guess his might be the last flight out of the shrinking capital?

He had been told at the start he would pick up a woman with medicine for the suffering soldiers still fighting, but he had never believed it. He had expected he had been named to evacuate the Führer for the final stand that would come in the

south at Berchtesgaden high in the Alps. But the original orders were true. He was driving a woman of no particular importance carrying a box, one that could not contain enough medicine to save a platoon of wounded men.

And the rest of his orders . . .

How had Hitler's mistress put it? "You understand, once you take off, Frau Schwein is to be your only passenger."

Yes, that is what she had said. And he was to be the only pilot. Why, he wondered. How could his mission be so important?

"Don't question," he said aloud.

He had been in the Hitler Youth as a boy.

He had heard Hitler first at the Krone Circus in Munich. There had been a craving for sensation in those days. The band played rousing marches. Black, white, and red flags displaying the swastika were everywhere.

Roars of "*heil*" had burst from the Brownshirts marching in.

The crowd went wild when Hitler appeared. People gestured, waved, and shouted "*heil*" continuously. They stood on benches and stamped their feet into a crescendo of thunder.

A trumpet blasted.

On stage Hitler had stretched out his arm in salute. More shouts from the crowd. Finally the great man spoke: slow and emphatic at first. Later words tumbled forth. At his peak the speech was unintelligible. His hands flew about; he jumped like a jack-in-the-box.

And Burgdorf had cheered with the rest.

Later he had flown Stukas diving on Poland. He had been at the wheel of JU-52's dropping parachutists on Crete. He had flown what and where they told him. He couldn't change now.

A shriek pierced his ears; an explosion temporarily deafened him; shrapnel shattered his windshield. He felt blood running down from his forehead, and the car jerked to the right, bouncing its fender off the side of a disabled tank.

One tire had blown. The car hobbled forward. It barely moved even with the accelerator pushed to the floor. Steam poured from beneath the hood. The engine coughed and sputtered, and he wondered if the petrol made from coal was finally going to fail him.

He looked back. If the woman had been injured or killed by the shrapnel, he could abandon the wounded car and make it faster on foot.

But Frau Schwein still sat rigidly erect on the rear seat, the cardboard box next to her. Blood reddened her sleeve, yet nothing in her hardened face suggested pain.

Burgdorf drove on, making his way through the hell of sounds and flame. He ignored the bodies and the thumping of the flattened tire.

Then there it was, the Victory Tower, what was left of it.

First he saw only the other JU-52 rolling down the street, whirlwinds of bursting shells rising on either side.

Its takeoff answered another doubt of his. He had thought perhaps he had been duped. Perhaps the Führer had intended to make good his escape on the other plane all along, but that was not possible. No one could have reached the thoroughfare from the bunker before Burgdorf.

And his own cargo, twenty-five stretchers loaded with wounded, was already being put aboard his aircraft. His copilot was supervising the operation.

The sight of the uncovered men on the stretchers sickened the captain. Half were conscious. As he drew nearer, he could see the befuddled expressions on some of the scarred and bandaged faces. The men could not understand their good fortune at being among the few chosen to be evacuated.

Burgdorf drove the faces from his mind. He couldn't think about them as human. They were all part of some greater plan. Surely they were.

He watched the takeoff of the plane that had come into the city with him. The bird rattled along the rough pavement. Its wheels dipped in potholes and its wings wobbled. It seemed incapable of gaining altitude, and ahead rose the spire of an unidentifiable building, its other walls collapsed.

Why hadn't the fool workmen dynamited the building, Burgdorf wondered. It would have given the ship a better chance.

Then the nose lifted as the plane raised its wheels from the ground. Climbing at an angle just short of a stall, it wobbled. leveled off ten feet above the structure, and disappeared. In the street men were cheering. They danced about in a witches' minuet of confusion. The men cheered again when the captain left the car and walked to the remaining Junker. His copilot

already had the engines running. The last of the wounded were loaded aboard. Then the men saw Frau Schwein. Her nurse's uniform explained enough, and she went into the aircraft first.

Still outside, Burgdorf paused to study his runway.

A perverse shell landed squarely in the center a quarter of the way down its length. Men rushed off with their shovels to fill it in.

During that moment the captain felt the sensation of being watched, or perhaps it was the glint of sunlight off glass that captured his attention. He looked up into the rubble.

There he saw the man with the scoped rifle aiming in his direction.

Now? Burgdorf asked himself. Was he going to die now from a German gun?

Why?

He didn't understand until the man behind the rocks tossed the gun aside, rose, and walked off in the direction of exploding shells.

The captain understood.

The man with the rifle had thought, as he had, that the planes were meant for Hitler's escape. The rifleman had intended to prevent any escape for the man responsible for the disastrous defeat. But only wounded were being taken aboard.

The flier laughed.

It was insane. His flight into the city. His orders. The battle in which thousands were dying for nothing. Or at best the battle continued to provide a few more hours of life for a feebleminded derelict surviving in the stale air of an enormous coffin.

Still, orders were orders.

Soon enough there would be no more orders.

Sighing, he climbed into the transport and closed the door.

At the rear of the plane Frau Schwein was disappearing behind a blanket that had been strung across the stripped-down fuselage to provide her a degree of privacy. She carried her cardboard box with her.

Stepping over the silent wounded, the pilot did not look down. Nor, when he reached his seat at the controls, did he look at his copilot. The man was two years his junior, tall, strong, and somewhat emotional.

Burgdorf did not want to remember his name.

They dispensed with the usual pretakeoff checklist. Nothing mattered. The wall that provided a modicum of shelter had crumbled; the artillery was bracketing in on them. They could not stay where they were regardless of what the checkoff might reveal.

The pilot did not consider the men still filling the shell hole when he pushed the throttles forward. The old corrugated body of the craft shivered and shook. The engines sounded sick. Instruments failed to function.

But they were rolling. The plane bounced and rattled like a World War I ambulance trying to reach the front.

Burgdorf ignored the speed indicator. He nursed the plane by touch, the only sensor he could trust on the battered bird.

He saw the men scamper for safety. One wheel mushed in the hole, and he thought for a second the plane would veer to the right. His hands corrected for the sideward tug on the wheels. Shells bursting ahead masked his vision. He could no longer see the spire at the end of the runway.

"It is of no importance," he told himself.

He eased back when he felt the plane had reached air speed. For twenty yards it disobeyed him, then began to climb, slower than he wanted, defiant, the war machine taking over from its failing masters.

"Captain!" the copilot screamed. His hand instinctively stretched across in front of Burgdorf's face and pointed to the building on the left.

It was too late. To have banked away would pull them into a fatal stall. The pilot could only watch as the building clipped the wing. It tore off the tip and pulled the entire plane in that direction. The nose dipped a little, and the two men up front looked down at the mountain of stone beneath them. They both shoved back in their seats as if they would put off death a fraction of a second more.

Burgdorf eased the throttles forward slightly, a seemingly suicidal move, but at the same time he hauled back on the stick. Then explosions and flying debris and flames filled the narrow windows through which they looked. Their vision was blanked out.

Behind them the wounded were screaming.

The captain sighed. It was over, he thought.

It took him a moment to realize they were still airborne.

They were skimming the ruins five feet above the tallest trees or the nearest lampposts.

They were in smoke; their windshield was taking a brutal pelting; but they had not crashed. Artillery shells were trying to knock them from the sky.

Behind them the workers would think they had crashed somewhere in the no-man's-land of decay. Yet the plane was slowly gaining the altitude they would need eventually if they were going to conserve enough petrol to reach their refueling point.

The pilot took a hand from the controls in order to make a sign with his thumb toward the rear compartment.

"Now," he said.

"Already?" The copilot was appalled.

Burgdorf paid no attention to the main compartment where the men on stretchers lay, but he could hear the roar of the wind as the sliding door of the aircraft slapped open. Then came relative silence, followed by the first scream. Immediately more of the wounded were shouting and yelling. Their voices were weak with pain but strengthened when they realized what was being done.

Toward the end the pilot twisted until he could see his assistant and Frau Schwein carrying the last stretcher to the open door. They slid the wounded man out as if he were being buried at sea although the taut canvas stretcher went with him. The two executioners stood silently, leaning into the brisk wind until they could see the last body hit the ground. Then the nurse returned to her protected area and the copilot closed the door.

His expression remained unnaturally benign as he approached the flight control compartment. He had stooped to regain his seat when he first noticed the captain had removed the Luger from its holster.

"No," the younger man said before a hole opened in his forehead. Blood squirted from the opening. Stumbling backward, he sat down in the rear compartment, then reclined leisurely. His dead eyes remained alert even with the blood running down between them, an unspoken comment on the final betrayal.

Burgdorf looked past the corpse to the blanket covering the very rear of the aircraft.

Why was the nurse so important, he wondered.

1

The Present

People had called Grissen by the nickname Gristle for so long he had taken to using that as his given name on his checks. He introduced himself the same way.

"Gristle Grissen, with CBS."

Or he used the other American network names, the news-service initials, and even the abbreviated names for the local news media wherever he happened to be at the time. Actually he worked for no one in particular. No one would have him.

A slow, shuffling old man at forty-one, fat and buttery, he had so perfected his pathetic image that he knew no other. In the States he was the scourge of the welfare system. He disliked work so much it made him nervous. The mere thought of work made him so nervous that his heart raced erratically. His blood pressure soared when he appeared before a doctor who had the authority to certify him as disabled.

If his physical responses failed, he could outwait a stubborn physician. He would fish a cheap cigar from his pocket, bite off the end, and spit it onto the carpet or toward the sterilized sink. He sucked it in and out between pursed lips until it was a disgustingly soggy pulp that left bits of tobacco on his teeth. Or he lit the cigar with a wooden match scratched across the doctor's desk.

Protests didn't stop him. Criticism made him more pathetic. He couldn't work because his parents, his school, his environment, the world had failed to teach him the most rudimentary of social graces. He got all that across with a change of a few facial muscles that expressed more hurt than Charlie Chaplin had ever displayed in his silent screen masterpieces.

Barring success with his physical complaints, he attempted suicide, first making certain the appropriate officials were made to feel responsible and that his methods would prove nonlethal. He scissored people between guilt and compassion.

He did all this without thinking of himself as a cheat.

He had an impatient father to blame. The man had no more ambition than his second son, and his mother lavished attention on his older brother.

Once inside a hospital Gristle became the perfect psychiatric patient. He responded to therapy, then lapsed back shortly before his release. He recovered sufficiently only when he heard the magic words, "outpatient care."

With the welfare checks coming in, he faithfully attended every buzz session with the counselors. He created elaborate sexual fantasies that entertained the most cynical group leader, and he followed every suggestion as to retraining. He attended trade schools plus college in how to counsel the mentally ill and the chronically unemployed. He studied to be a male nurse, a physical therapist, a psychiatric aide, and anything else that provided food stamps and a sufficient largesse during training. He made jobs for innumerable people in the never-ending-struggle to help him return "to the real world."

Conveniently he relapsed before completing anything.

He grew fat, moved slower, and became more belligerent when anyone suggested he was on the dole, that he might be depriving people who really needed help.

On those rare periods when the computer or a new wave of reform springing up around election time slashed him from the rolls, he went to work at the only trade he knew: investigative reporting.

He was surprisingly good—cunning and cold-minded when need be. He made excellent money and squirreled it away as a cushion to be used when he was on some sort of government program again.

Unfortunately he also had a strong sex drive that eventually

trapped him in the wrong bed. It left him no choice except to leave the States in a hurry. He had ended up in Italy where the language barrier blunted his skills for wrenching sympathy from doctors and bureaucrats.

For three months he had been forced to work, and his by-line had begun to appear in newspapers around the world again. The last story had ended in Venice, Italy, when he had accumulated almost enough money to return to the States, find a new generous state welfare system, and lapse into his more normal state of lassitude.

He needed one final story, and he had it in sight.

In his intuitive imagination he could almost see the odd shape beneath the water. He was staring down into the heavily silted portion of the Venetian lagoon that for generations had separated the island city from the mainland.

"Farther to the right," Gristle Grissen said as he made a motion with his right hand to the skin diver below. "Damnit, farther to the right." It was obviously impossible for the diver to hear him although he was down less than ten feet in the murky water.

In ancient times the lagoon had been a natural moat. Bedeviled by barbarians who had spilled southward from beyond the Alps, the people living at the north end of the Adriatic Sea had sought to escape the murderous Huns, Visigoths, and Lombards. The invaders killed everyone in sight and burned what they left behind.

The Venetians were trapped at the northern end of the sea that jabbed a finger of water between modern-day Italy, Yugoslavia, and Albania. They fled across mud flats and the shallow lagoon to the islands nearest their homes. The attacking Alaric and Attila floundered as boatsmen, and the archipelago was protected by the lagoon on three sides. On the fourth was a narrow reef that served as a breakwater between the flourishing city-state and the Adriatic.

But as Gristle Grissen was rapidly discovering, silt from the river feeding the lagoon now threatened to change the area into a dry delta. The gathering silt explained why his prize was buried in mud.

Constant dredging of the channels crisscrossing the lagoon, however, kept open the waterway far across the flats from the city proper.

He had rented a power launch by the hour and hired a skin

diver to help. He had no intention of putting his own body in the water on such a cold, blustery winter's day. The payment, of course, was in promises. Before he reached the dock back on the Rialto, the city's main island with its several hundred canals, he would have to think of some excuse to put off payment. He never paid anyone. He was a master gamesman at avoiding the check at a restaurant, forgetting his debts, and changing hotels before the proprietor became nervous about the growing bill. A cheap suitcase left behind at every lodging place was his favorite ploy.

But today he was in a hurry, not to reduce costs, but because the story he had stumbled upon in Harry's Bar just past Saint Mark's Square had value only if it was exclusive.

It was one of those curious human-interest stories that people enjoyed to soothe their nerves after reading about the daily threats world leaders used to keep their subjects in constant turmoil and fear.

Grissen was afraid another curious reporter might follow him and get the story into print before he did.

So when the diver came up with an object in his hands, Gristle grabbed it from the shivering boy. Although he wore a wetsuit, the diver's hands were red with cold and his face was brown with mud. He looked completely miserable.

Gristle didn't give a damn.

"*Che cosa é questo*?" he demanded.

He grabbed the object and left it to the launch owner to help the boy aboard.

The sometime newsman turned the metal piece over curiously in his hand. Approximately four inches by six, it was corrugated but unusually light for its size once he had swished off the mud.

Gristle kept his back to the Italians, determined that neither of them would guess what they had found.

Swishing it around in the water again, he held it so the sallow winter sun could illuminate it as much as possible. Now he was certain what he held in his hand. It matched what he had heard the old men discussing in Harry's Bar. His Italian was poor, though he had studied languages extensively during the long leisurely days when he was on government subsistence allowance. But he had understood enough of the Venetian dialect between the two local men sitting in the corner of the world-renowned tavern: Harry's. It was a fa-

mous place for no particular reason. The bar was not unusually long nor were the drinks particularly good. If you were patient enough, you could eat there at one of the few tables that filled a third of the space. Normally you stood, drank, and talked to people from all over the world who stopped there for no reason except it was close to the main tourist attractions of Venice.

Suddenly Gristle grew more possessive. He had remembered another reporter not totally unlike himself: Michael Hawk. The other journalist traveled the world searching for just such a story as Grissen had found in the silt along the edge of the channel.

Suspiciously Gristle held the metal against his stomach and peered about like a cat with a piece of fish he expects all his feline neighbors to covet.

Actually the boat was some distance from the city, but within a radius of four hundred meters were three houses wreathed in mist. They were isolated from each other by channels and mud flats, and from the rest of the city by the more open areas of the lagoon.

The structures had been built years, perhaps centuries, before from buff-colored stone. Each was three stories tall with arched and shuttered windows on all sides. They all had red tile roofs that had lost their color and were spotted by redder replacements. Reaching another story above the sloped roofs were identical chimneys topped with the characteristic Venetian pots. The chimneys and their pots were much like the towers of Moslem mosques.

From the houses crude docks extended a short distance into the channel; none of the dwellings could be reached by ground transportation.

The nearest house was separated from the mud on three sides by trees and thick brush. The fourth side of the small low-lying island faced the channel.

The shutters were open on one window of the house.

Gristle could imagine someone inside watching him.

"Let's go," he said with sudden impatience to his dark-skinned driver. He was uneasy and he didn't know why. "*Andiamo*."

He was afraid, as a man who has just found gold fears that claim jumpers are watching from the horizon. But that didn't

quite explain the odd sensations he felt. Nothing explained that feeling.

He needed this story. He didn't want to go on working any longer than absolutely necessary.

The man in the wet suit sat down and the other Italian switched on the boat's engine. They came about before they saw the other craft coming slowly toward them from the direction of the city proper.

Both launches were similar. Neither was the hand-poled gondola that foreigners associated with the island city. They were speedboats with highly varnished wooden hulls. Both had a seat in the open up front where the driver sat behind a windshield for protection. Behind that was a small enclosed cabin with spacious windows to provide maximum visibility. And at the rear was another plastic seat in the open.

It was from the rear position that the skin diver had entered the water, but now he was in the cabin with Gristle. Through the cabin windows the two saw the second boat approaching.

In the busier canals of the city neither would have noticed. But in this isolated waterway snaking through mud flats, another boat was a surprise.

So too was the lack of a name on the bow.

Gristle rode in the *Guido*, its throaty engines already picking up speed.

The path the second boat took was startling too. It was aimed to intersect the *Guido* on the right-hand side of the channel.

"Hey!" Gristle reacted. "Watch out for that sonofabitch," he yelled to the driver. "He's liable to hit us."

The *Guido* veered to the side to avoid a collision.

Then all three men saw the passenger standing up in the front of the oncoming boat. At the same moment they realized the man was pointing something at them.

Gristle knew what it was first. "Run!" he shouted. "More speed! Goddamn you, more speed!"

The others didn't recognize the danger until bullets began spraying from the Beretta 9 mm Model 12 submachine gun. Its stubby barrel protruded less than two inches into the open in front of the forward handle. Bullets spat from the clip with loud popping sounds.

The first burst of shots made a neat line of eyelike holes across the *Guido*'s windshield. There were empty places for

the pupils and uneven lines squiggling outward from what could have been the iris of a human eye. The slugs continued straight through the glass and into the cabin except where the Italian boatman blocked their passage.

"A-w-w-w," he yelled as his hand let go of the wheel. He took one bewildered look at the blood gurgling from his chest and slumped over on his side. His grip drew back on the throttle and the engine went into reverse, slamming the skin diver and Gristle into the forward wall of the cabin. It caused a wild churning of the muddy water at their stern.

The skin diver, a boy in his teens, seemed riveted in position while chips of wood and shards of glass began flying into the cabin.

Gristle tried to fit his plump body into the space between the seats while yelling at the boy.

"Get up front, you fucking wop; get us moving."

The boy stomped on Grissen with one of his flippers and made for the rear exit. He meant to dive for safety, but bullets took off the top of his head. His hair completely disappeared. The skull was torn away underneath to expose the brain like a plastic model in a biology lab.

The diver's momentum drove him through the rear door and more slugs knocked him over the stern and into the water.

"My God, my God," Gristle cried. It was as close as he had come to praying in decades. The last time had been when his disability check had been three days overdue and he had run out of drinkable brandy.

He could not comprehend what was happening.

He was caught in the middle of some dago vendetta, he thought. Or someone had mistaken him for one of the filthy rich Italians that terrorists kidnapped with a certain cavalier abandon.

It never occurred to him that the bullets were meant for him.

But the selfish instincts that made him a survivor took over the second he knew there was no one left to save him from the bullets that were piercing the cabin. His soft flesh sprang into action like a trained athlete's. He crawled forward, pulled the body in the front seat out of the way, and took over the controls.

With his head barely above the protective front of the boat,

he shoved the throttle ahead. The other craft was coming alongside, slowing so the lean man with the machine gun could board.

"Don't shoot," Gristle cried. "You got both of 'em already."

But the gun barrel shifted toward him.

Grissen thrust the throttle full foward. The engine hesitated for a terrifying moment, threatening to die on him, then caught and sent the bow ramming into the side of its opponent. The wood cracked and snapped as easily as the kindling a man breaks across his knee to start a fire.

The gunman lost his balance and fell.

Gristle spun the steering wheel, but the engine only roared. The two boats were locked together and the armed man was rising again.

Hauling back on the throttle, the American put the *Guido*'s engine in reverse. It pulled free, but water poured in through the shattered bow. He put it in forward again and steered for the center of the channel. The boat picked up speed, keeping most of the hole in front above the waterline.

"Fucking wops," Gristle yelled over his shoulder when he thought he was going to escape.

Turning in its own length, though, the pursing craft took after him.

Now the bullets were chopping at the stern where the engine and gas tanks were vulnerable. A few were cracking near Gristle's head.

One tank blew.

The thrust of the concussion was enough to ram Grissen into the wheel. The heat seared the back of his neck. A ball of flame tried to roll through the cabin to get him.

He was still pushing the throttle forward harder as if he had a chance to press extra speed from the burning engine. He glanced over his shoulder, and flames dried the thin layer of fluid covering his eyes. Blinded, he didn't see the bend in the channel. He plowed straight into the foot-deep ter. The bow buried itself in mud.

Thrown forward, he dragged his flab from the seat and over the edge.

Then he was in the water, running and thrashing. His feet sank deep into the silt. On the flat, mud sucked off his shoes. He sank in over his ankles.

Each step became a rung to climb in a ladder. He had to overcome the suction of the mud to take a single step. Then smaller holes were being pierced to the side and ahead of him. He tried to change direction. The 9 mm holes followed.

He fell flat on his face.

He tried to crawl, using the piece of metal the skin diver had brought up from below the surface to dig into the mud in order to draw himself forward faster than he could with his fingers.

The first bullet to hit him shattered his kneecap. The impact rolled him over on his side.

The second tore his arm half off his shoulder, the wound gaping with gore. He flopped onto his belly again.

With the one hand left holding the metal, he inched forward toward the center of the vast, flat, barren land.

He was crying: "Daddy, Mommy."

More bullets poked at his spine, and he arched his back before thrusting his good arm behind him as if he could pluck out the offended slug.

The blackness came fast for him.

On the other boat the two men steered closer and stopped while the one with the gun poured an entire clip of bullets into the body. He had been taught to be thorough.

They moved away quickly, knowing the burning motorboat and the sound of gunfire would attract attention. Word would spread to the Rialto, and the police would be on their way soon.

The gunman's job was finished.

Gristle Grissen no longer needed welfare or disability checks.

2

The ceremony was small though charged with sensuality. The participants were as avid aficionados as those at any bullfight.

Tall American Michael Hawk stood at the center of the ring of executives and craftsmen. They had come out of the plant in Bologna to watch the hand-built Lamborghini be rolled into the open by four men in immaculate white jump suits.

The machine appeared small for a man of Hawk's six-foot-plus body, but the bucket seats were crafted to his slender, muscular shape, and there was room for his thick head of hair.

His eyes glistened with appreciation for the details the builders had included.

Low-slung with the front and rear both sloped steeply toward the pavement, the car's design made it difficult to guess which direction it traveled. All the sides (windows, glass roof) were swung upward as a single-piece unit in place of doors. The unit rose high enough for a driver and passenger to slip under and into the glove-leather white seats of the model Countach-S, the top of the custom-made line.

Dramatically the ranking Italian in the ceremony held out the set of fourteen-karat-gold keys to the man in the suede jacket and the opened-neck sports shirt.

Hawk accepted the offering with the reverence the moment deserved. A man could buy an exclusive home almost anywhere for the price he had paid in cash for the machine with its impeccable pedigree.

"*Bello*," Mike smiled.

"A work of art," the executive said in English. He removed his rimless glasses and lightly massaged the tender red spots on the bridge of his nose.

Hawk agreed. "*Si, signore*." The six hundred men at the plant had put their hearts and skill into the flawless construction. They were as proud as any artist. "It should be in a museum," the thirty-five-year-old American mused.

"Ah, no, no," the executive frowned. A few of the workmen who understood English matched their superior's objection. "On the *autostrada*. There it lives and breathes, free. Not in a museum."

Hawk ran his hand through his light brown hair. He agreed.

The machine wouldn't breathe easily until she was flashing along at a hundred miles per hour.

A somewhat rugged man with his skin well tanned from the past few months in hot, sunny climates, he did not quite look like one who could appreciate a piece of precision machinery that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. He did not look like an art lover either. Nor did he have the soft, plump build of a gourmet. He was too lean and strong for anyone to guess that he knew foods as well as most experts.

His demeanor did not reveal the complexity of the man. His piercing eyes had a touch of compassion that decried the fact that he could kill with his hands or in close with a knife. He preferred, however, a weapon like the little-known Dardick pistol he carried in a holster strapped to his belt beneath his sports jacket.

His regard for guns was a sort of love-hate relationship. He loved the smell of powder, the lines of good design, the scent of Hopps Number 9. He could cherish ivory grips yellowed naturally by age, and he enjoyed punching holes in the bull's-eye of paper targets.

But he carried a weapon for protection. Unlike the Lamborghini, guns had to be utilitarian.

The Model 1500, caliber .38 Dardick was just that. Anything but attractive, it had a barrel that stuck out like an

afterthought and a high front sight that would hook on anything except an especially designed holster.

It did not even fit the distinction between revolvers and pistols that most gunmen took as gospel. It was based on an open-chamber system. A three-legged piece like a star wheel served as the cylinder. It rotated clockwise, indexing the cartridges as they were fed upward from the spring-loaded magazine, providing two walls of the chamber and ejecting the fired cases from the receiver.

Even the cartridge had a strange name: "tround." It had a triangular-shaped outer case of plastic. The bullet did not protrude from the case, and the propellant was contained in the aluminum sleeve. The primer was seated in a pocket at the end of the plastic case.

The thing looked awful, but it held fifteen killing cartridges.

Besides, the ugly duckling was all Hawk could buy in Rome without attracting attention. The kid who sold it to him shortly after Mike disembarked from the L-1011 was glad to be rid of it. Hawk was glad to have a gun.

That was especially true as he slid behind the wheel of the Countach-S.

He had no personal enemies at the moment, but Italy was the kidnapping mecca of the world. The swashbuckling car was a rolling invitation to those who made their living from ransom. But Hawk had not been able to resist when he heard he had a chance to skip the usual two-year waiting list for an exotic piece of transportation.

An Arab sheik's overthrow had been Hawk's good fortune.

Not that he bought the car in his own name. Technically it belonged to a trading company in Hong Kong, but it was Michael Hawk, the butcher's son from Rockford, Illinois, who switched on the ignition.

The engine responded with a deep-throated growl. It was the opera star among cars, the Elvis Presley of rock, the Bing Crosby of swing.

At the sound everyone in the group grinned. Mike smiled as if he were listening to the Philharmonic. The seat was more comfortable than anything Chippendale had ever made. He held up his hand, forming an "O" with his thumb and index finger. He leaned forward and kissed the dash.

"A beautiful virgin," he said, inhaling the rich aroma of the interior.

His ecstasy dissolved as he spotted the company photographer coming through to record the event.

Michael Hawk couldn't have that. The American IRS sleuths weren't naïve enough to think itinerant newsmen bought cars styled by the likes of Giorgietto Giugiaro, Italy's top freelancer in luxury automobiles.

Touching the button that brought the side panels sliding down beside him, Hawk also depressed the foot pedal and listened to the vaunted varoom. He shifted into gear and put the muscular engine to work.

The surprised craftsmen had to scurry from the front of their creation. The cameraman snapped a picture showing nothing more than the back of Michael Hawk's head.

And the American was on his way to the super highway leading across the northern part of the Italian boot, bypassing Ferrara and Padova, and heading for Venice.

Briefly the exhilaration with his new purchase was lost in the melancholy of having no one to show his prize to. He hoped he would meet friends in Venice, men he had worked with when he was truly a journalist. That was the entire idea of the trip. He had to make a pretense of working occasionally to satisfy the tax people, but there was no way he could show the expensive car to anyone he knew.

The suspicion would be immediate.

Among newsmen it was never too long before suspicion turned to curiosity and curiosity led to the truth.

Truth was one thing Michael Hawk could never reveal.

No one could ever guess that he was among the wealthiest men in the world, that he had no idea how much money he could tap if he chose to.

The knowledge would be an enticing scent to a worldwide unrelated catchall of criminals, dictators, and plain old tax collectors.

But he tucked that far back in his mind. For now he was the owner of a futuristic vehicle hurtling along the highway at speeds which put him beyond the touch of the fastest police vehicles on the road. He was at the Indianapolis 500, racing against time on the Grand Prix, skidding in the turns at Riverside, and battling the elements during the old Baja 500.

He was king of the road.

But he had no idea what awaited him in Venice. Gondoliers and their Neopolitan songs; canals and masterpieces

of architecture; and Harry's Bar. That's what he expected. More, much more lay ahead.

He parked his new expensive toy in a private garage in the Piazzale Roma and paid a tidy ransom to a security guard he did not really trust. There was no choice. Cars had been banned from the narrow alleys and squares of Venice for years. It saved the Venetian buildings from being turned black by exhaust fumes and allowed fewer decibels of noise in comparison with other Italian cities.

Besides there was little room for cars on the Rialto's labyrinth of canals, alleys, and miniature squares among stone buildings pressed tightly together like passionate lovers.

From the causeway linking the largest island in the vast lagoon to the mainland, he boarded a water-bus.

The bus took him past decaying structures, haunting reminders of a bygone age. The buildings had risen in an era when Venice was called *La Serenissima*, the Most Serene Republic. At its zenith Venetian merchant masters had lived more lavishly than kings.

Eventually he reached a landing a hundred yards from the tourist attraction of Saint Mark's Square on the main island. Actually it was a pair of islands separated by the Grand Canal. He had reservations at a hotel along the main waterway, but he had no intention of going directly to the converted ancient palace where he planned to stay. He would go there later when he was more certain that he was not being tailed.

In spite of floods, high tides, and the general sinking of the land, the palaces of merchant princes still stood. A few were the private homes of the social elite, descendants of traders who amassed their fortunes hundreds of years before. Their names were written in the Book of Gold, the social register from the time when Venice ruled the known seas.

The palaces were gnarled and gothic, some stately, some baroque. Many now served a commercial purpose or were relegated to the status of museums.

Tonight the butcher's son would sleep in the bed of "A Worthy One," the chief member of a once powerful family.

This afternoon the sky was mauve-colored and a cold wind from the north added whitecaps to the wakes of the endless

boat traffic. He stepped onto the pier, carrying his cheap suitcase and a portable typewriter.

A glance at a watch told him he was late.

He had expected to be late. He had not allowed enough time for the trip as an excuse to put the custom-made car through her paces, but now he worried that he had pushed his luck. The news bureau chief that he had come to see might be tucked away in a media backwater to serve out his years until retirement, but Hawk remembered Ceperley the way he had been when he was younger.

Cep—his associates rarely called him anything else—was quiet and unassuming. He just demanded more than any man or woman could deliver. Hawk could never forget bringing his first scoop into the city desk in Davenport, Iowa, only to have Cep grunt and hand across a clipping from the opposition paper. Hawk had missed a marriage license in covering the courthouse. To hell with the scoop. That Ceperley expected from everybody. Mistakes were unforgivable in his workaholic mind.

When Mike entered the bedlam of Harry's Bar, though, he saw Cep waiting gloomily at a corner table. He had a bottle of wine in front of him; no more than a glassful had been poured from it.

Gray-haired and thinner, Cep looked old and tired. He wouldn't last a year, Hawk guessed. Blue threads of smoke spread upward from the cigarette dying between the stained fingers of his left hand.

"Cep," Mike greeted him after he had elbowed his way around the standing drinkers and reached the table. One chair was set forward on two legs and leaned against the red and white checkered tablecloth to ward off the leg-weary mob that filled the room.

"Broke again, eh, Hawk?" Cep sneered. "You never could hold a job."

Mike wanted to smile.

Yeah, he was broke. Like an Onassis, a Rockefeller, and a queen of England.

But he had to pretend to work sometime. At the end of the year he would have to falsify his income-tax statement. The IRS would leave him alone if he matched last year's income, plus an increment for inflation, and took the standard deduction like a good little nonentity.

For that he needed Cep and other editors around the world. He had to pick up a few thousand honest dollars during the year to hide the millions he held by chance.

The vast wealth he controlled had been blood money a Latin American dictator had squirreled away before he was deposed by an equally evil Communist despot. After the dictator had died, the secret international network of corporations, numbered bank accounts, and other assets had gone to his only surviving heir.

While Hawk was still an inquisitive reporter, the dictator's daughter had died in Mike's arms as she tried to keep the secret from her Communist pursuers. With her last words she had told Hawk the code and facts that turned the cornucopia of wealth over to him.

So he had all the money a man ever wanted, but he dared not let it show. If he did, the Reds and other sundry modern-day pirates would torture the key from him.

The girl had both blessed and cursed him with her secret.

Evasively Hawk spread his fingers and made a butterfly motion with his hand.

"You know how it is. I stopped in Rome to say hello, see if old Cep had anything going he couldn't spare his regulars to cover, and what do I hear? They've promoted you to Venice, land of the *doges* and the old masters. Just your style, Cep. Culture all the way. Bet you're part-timing it as a *cicisbeo* for the young wives of the richer princes these days."

"Cicisb . . . what?" Cep soured.

Hawk slid his luggage under the table, sat down, and drank from Ceperley's bottle without being asked. It was the act of a man without money.

"*Cicisbeo*," Hawk repeated. He loved playing word games with his one-time boss although what Cep lacked in rhetorical adroitness he made up in good common sense. "You know. Like gigolos. In the old days they used to squire the wives of the merchant princes to the opera and around town when the old boys were traveling. Don't tell me they're gone too. What's left of Venice? Paintings and pigeons?"

A waiter appeared and Hawk ordered *fritto misto di mare* and pointed at Cep to be sure the tab for the mixed seafood plate went on the news bureau chief's bill.

Cep took the bottle and filled his own glass to the brim.

The man across the table had plenty of "smarts" in Ceperley's book, but he just didn't like him. Hawk was too damned tall for his ex-boss. Tall men made Ceperley feel inadequate and that he didn't like. Through the years he had hired short, paunchy reporters whenever he could.

"Hawk, you're no damned good since you lost your wife." He stopped. His verbal knife had gone deeper than he had intended.

What he said was true.

Hawk had never been the same since he lost his Lisa. Beautiful, refined, she had been everything he wasn't. He had only one thing going for him prior to their marriage. He could sense a story halfway around the globe. He could get in and out of wars alive after photographing and interviewing madmen and guerrillas who usually shot on sight anybody they didn't know.

But Lisa had changed that. She had shown Michael Hawk the better side of life. Art, music, literature, exquisite cooking, the best in wines. And he had tried to show her a little of his own world. He had taken her with him once too often, into Africa where a lunatic was systematically annihilating his own people while leaders of the free world talked about nonintervention and self-determination.

Hawk had come out alone with Lisa's ashes.

Broken mentally, he had kept financially afloat by creating the news rather than reporting it. He had goaded an Iranian holy man until he was sentenced to be beheaded, only to make the story more thrilling with a last-minute escape. He had gone into Russia where he played spy until they sent him into one of their psychiatric hospitals. They nearly destroyed what was left of his mind.

He had done it with reckless abandon just for an inside story that was worth enough to keep him in food, booze, women, and cheap hotels until he could score again.

Then he had fallen heir to the wealth that really belonged to no one.

With more luck than the most addicted gambler expected in a lifetime, he was rich. A phone call to a number in Liechtenstein, the postage-stamp-sized country tucked between Switzerland and Austria, was all it took. The call put in motion the communication grid that got him all the money he could use and more.

The wealth sobered him. He had to live to keep the money and the power it represented from men like the one who had executed his Lisa.

So he couldn't let anyone know, no one, that is, except one bastard in the CIA who occasionally made use of Hawk's big secret.

Right now, though, the man across the table meant an honest-to-God paycheck that Hawk could report to the revenuers in Washington.

Ceperley stared at his visitor. He didn't apologize for his reference to the tall man's dead wife.

He apologized for nothing.

He had no friends, wanted none. His fierce approach to any relationship had protected him from hurt for a lifetime.

Liver spots were forming on his hands, and the raw patches on his face looked cancerous, but he maintained his old mean self.

"Well, what the fuck did you call me for, Hawk? Collect from Rome. Hell, at least you were never tight before. You were always the easy touch for any rummy in the skid rows, the boweries, and the Chinatowns of the world."

Mike grinned. "Not rummies, Cep. Friends. You wouldn't know what that means. But they're what made me such a damned good newsman that I didn't have to sit around news bureaus and rewrite stories from the wire services or type obits about assholes like you."

"So, now what, big shot? Every other editor tell you to kiss off? You need a lead and an advance. Right?"

"A lead is good enough," Hawk said coolly. "My wallet isn't as flat as a fashion model's breasts quite yet. So what have you got?"

"Who says I got anything for you? I have my own people. Italians. They speak the language. Ours too. We don't miss a thing coming out of northern Italy."

Mike smiled. "Bullshit."

"Bullshit? What makes you think I need you?"

"Because you're sitting there, Cep, letting me drink your wine. You didn't tell me to go to hell when I called from Rome and said I was looking for an assignment."

Cep reached for his bottle and missed. Hawk was emptying it.

"That doesn't mean crap," he said. "I let you run your ass up here because . . ."

Mike finished the sentence for him. ". . . because you have one of those itchy hunches guys like you and I get about a buried news story. The psoriasis of the legman. That's what you got. And you're hoping I can come up with Hawk's famous elixir again before you scratch yourself bloody."

Ceperley clamped his lips together, folded his arms, and leaned back in his chair. He hated admitting that Hawk was right.

He wouldn't, directly.

"A friend of yours got killed two days ago," he said evasively. "That's why I had you drive up. Thought you'd want to know."

Hawk grew serious. "A friend?"

"Grissen."

"Grissen?"

Cep was impatient. His lie wouldn't hold up for a second. "Grissen. Grissen. You know, the fat little guy who could always outreport you, outwrite you, outscoop you any day he tried."

"Gristle?"

"Yeah, Gristle. You know any other top reporter called Grissen?"

"Gristle?" Hawk was indignant. "That lazy, story-stealing welfare looter was no friend of mine. That buffalo turd never got a lead on his own. He picked carbon paper out of the wastebaskets and stole ideas. That's what he did when he couldn't badger some poor overworked social worker into putting him in a hospital for a broken toenail. Gristle had no friends. His father castrated himself, and his mother had a hysterectomy after he was born. That shitface . . ."

Cep interrupted. "Yeah, yeah, so he was about as nice to be around as a bull pissing on a rock. He's dead."

"Good. If they're taking up a collection for the killer, let me know. I'll be the biggest donor."

"He was on to something, Mike."

"Like hell he was. He was never worth a fart in a windstorm."

Ceperley didn't give up. "He was working on a lead." He raised his hand before the man across the table could interrupt again. "You hear what I said? Grissen was *working*, I mean

he was really digging. You know that limp ball of fat wouldn't crack eggs with a hammer unless the story was so damned intriguing he stood to make enough to take off the rest of the year. He was good. Just lazier than a refrigerated Mexican jumping bean."

Mike's interest had been aroused.

What Ceperley said was true. Gristle stole ideas from every reporter he met. He blatantly copied whatever he could. But on those rare occasions when he worked on something of his own, he went after the big story or the one with pathos, human interest, the kind that saves a newspaper or a television newscast from becoming grimmer than a mortician's handshake.

"You say he was killed?"

Cep nodded and leaned closer. He lowered his voice as if anyone could hear from more than a foot away in the din of the popular bar.

"Get this, Hawk. He calls me. Says he's onto something big."

"And asks for an advance."

"No. That's just it. All he wants is that I know where he's staying in case."

"In case of what?"

"I don't know. Then two days ago the police find him."

"Stealing from the poor box at the church?" Hawk suggested.

"Facedown in the mud this side of the Lido. You know, that stretch of land that separates the lagoon from the sea. It's wall-to-wall hotels now along that lousy beach even though you get leg cramps before you can walk out far enough to get your knees wet. He's facedown in the mud and so full of holes he looks like one of those practice golf balls you can drive inside the house."

"It figures. I'd have kicked his ass up under his armpits if I had seen him alive again. Somebody was going to shoot him eventually, so where's the story in that?"

"They didn't just kill him."

"They?"

"Whoever. They killed the guy he had rented the motor launch from that took him out into those channels they keep dredged so the lagoon doesn't go dry. Hit the gas tanks and blew up the launch too."

Mike shook his head. "Still no big story. Could have been terrorists, kidnappers who got their signals mixed. Mafia, a local feud. Gristle probably got caught in the cross fire."

Ceperley lost his usual monotonic delivery. He leaned forward, his movement unexpectedly quick and adroit. For the first time in years he was excited.

"There was another person aboard that boat. A young Italian kid with no connection to the launch owner. Gristle hired him."

"The kid is dead too?" Hawk's curiosity had returned.

"Yep."

"There's more." Mike made it a statement.

"Yeah. Get this. The kid was wearing a wet suit."

"A wet suit?"

"Yeah. Apparently Gristle had hired him to swim around in that slime out there."

The editor popped an antacid tablet in his mouth and chewed. It gave his breath a slight medicinal smell not too unlike Vaporub.

"Grissen would never pay him."

"Probably not. But here's the kicker. The kid had scuba gear."

Mike cocked his head. His memory went back to other times he had been in Venice. From what Ceperley had told him, he gathered Gristle had been killed in an area where the channel probably ran no more than ten feet deep.

"What would he need breathing apparatus for?" Mike asked. "You can't see five feet in the muck around here."

"He had a face mask and a light. A small shovel."

"Meaning?"

Cep aired the conclusion for both of them. "The kid was sent down to dig, to dig out something pretty big. Something that had to be uncovered relatively fast. His tank held an hour's worth of air with a good safety margin."

"Something's buried out there?" Mike concluded. "But what?"

Ceperley put a hand in his lap and produced the small rectangle of corrugated metal that the boy had brought to the surface before the shooting began.

"Grissen was holding this when the police brought in his body. They figured it was meaningless, a sort of claw he was using to drag himself across the mud when he got the *coup*

de grâce. So when I asked for it, they gave it to me along with his personal effects which I'm supposed to send home, wherever that is.''

''This? But what the hell is it?''

''A piece of something,'' Cep volunteered.

''Great deduction. It's a piece of junk.''

Cep leaned closer. ''Maybe. Maybe not. But what was worth killing three men in broad daylight to keep hidden down there in the mud? An execution like that . . . with the chances of getting caught on the high side . . . would cost a fortune to hire.'' He paused. ''Curious now, Mr. Reporter?''

Hawk studied the piece of metal in his hand. Curiosity overwhelmed him. He didn't give a shit about Gristle. The money Cep might pay him meant nothing.

But the curiosity was overwhelming. He had to know.

3

The water-buses had sirens, the launches had Klaxons, outboards had deafening little motors, and the gondolas had gondoliers who thought they could sing. Radios blared from the windows of houses fronting the canal, and on the arched bridges above it women chattered and called in garbled stridency. The din was an isolation tent around Michael Hawk as his motor launch coursed off the Grand Canal. Ceperley rode quietly at his side.

Mike had bought the launch for cash from a surprised Italian. The man's eyes widened at the stacks of high denomination lira notes piled into his hand until a bargain had been struck. The American had not bothered with the niceties like licenses and titles. He wouldn't be in Venice long enough for the country's infamous bureaucrats to initial the application for a transfer. He never stayed long in any one place.

Today would be no exception. He had picked up Ceperley to help search for Gristle Grissen's apartment.

In Venice searching for an address required the patience of an archeologist and the instincts of a geologist searching for oil. More important, it took a native guide. Even Italians from other parts of the boot-shaped nation needed local help in connecting the Venetian dialect to the words on the few

street signs that weren't chipped beyond legibility. Hawk had engaged the aid of a street-wise boy about ten whom he dubbed Julio when they seemed unable to agree on what the kid's real name was.

They traveled a course through a muddle of small canals, past narrow streets, under crumbling bridges, and between rows of houses with common walls built to the water's edge. The smell was gut turning. Laws to the contrary, occasionally an upper window would open to expel a load of garbage or the contents of a chamber pot into the water below. Clouds of pigeons contributed their own rain of pollution.

Cep was defensive about his adopted city. "Some of the houses are museum pieces," he offered. "They date back for centuries."

Unfortunately, Hawk thought, these museums were lived in. Probably not by choice. The old and poor stayed behind. The young left the picturesque city for the mainland in quest of light, air, and proper sanitation.

To Hawk this part of Venice was a warren, a slum. The canals, twisting without design, were charming, but the alleys between the houses were something else. When they passed one of these narrow openings, he could see market stalls heaped with fruits and vegetables or jostling clusters of people in a hurry. The Venetian in the streets got the same bumping and scraping by his fellow human beings as did his counterparts in the Tokyo subway. The only difference was that here a stately church or convent often redeemed the murk of shadowed passageways.

Whether anything compensated for life in the dark, narrow houses, he didn't know. He had not yet reached his hotel; his suitcase was locked inside the cabin of the launch. From past experience he knew the Venetians considered the goods of outsiders to be a common property, especially here in the city's backyard.

At Ceperley's indication Hawk turned the boat toward the buildings and tied up. He took the ignition key with him and walked slowly with Ceperley, trailing the boy as he climbed two feet up into a stone-paved alley. For fifteen minutes he led them around corners, over bridges, and down littered streets too narrow for more than three people to walk abreast.

Finally, at one of the decaying tenements, the boy stopped and pointed to an upstairs window.

"Wait here," Hawk told the boy, his pointed finger more articulate than the English.

The handle was an elaborate lion-head design, but the door swung open on creaking, rusted hinges. Inside they waited for their eyes to adjust in the semidarkness. No lights were wasted to illuminate the apartments opening off the long first-floor corridor or the staircase of uncarpeted, foot-worn steps leading upward.

"Second floor," Ceperley said. "First door on the left, Gristle told me."

Hawk started to ask the old news bureau chief why he hadn't come here alone earlier, but as he took the first step, he thought he knew why.

It wasn't the musty smell of the house that stopped him, although, depending upon his nostrils alone, he would have guessed he was entering a crypt where uncovered bodies had rotted. It wasn't the dark at the top of the stairs or the paint that flaked off the walls under his fingers. It wasn't the sound of muffled voices from the apartments.

It was the odd, disquieting sensation of something unnatural that closed about Hawk like strong, gossamer threads wrapped around and around his body. He recognized the feeling. It had hit him before, when he visited Hiroshima and Auschwitz. The mouths of the dead spoke in the only voices available to them, with the memories they evoked in the visitor's minds.

Gristle Grissen's last tenement was as foreboding as a deserted concentration camp. Yet it was that unexplained threat, that tingle of dread which lured Hawk like a powerful magnet. In his nerves, in his gut, in his bones he could sense danger in meddling into this man's violent, mysterious death. But it was a challenge the ex-newspaperman could not resist.

Hawk's hand cupped the butt of his gun as they mounted the stairs. When he found the door they wanted, he paused.

"The police have been here, of course?" he asked.

Cep said, "Yes, but they're really only interested in the deaths of the launch owner and the skin diver, the locals. Near as I can tell, the *polizia* think the two Italians were the targets. Gristle was just another tourist in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Hawk tried the knob. It didn't give. "But you haven't been here? Nobody from your bureau?"

"Nope. We did put a blurb on the wire but without a hometown for Grissen, I don't suppose any paper picked it up."

"Got a key?"

"Hell, no."

Mike fished a credit card from his pocket and worked at the latch. It resisted longer than a modern lock, but eventually it gave way. From the far wall one window that hadn't been washed in generations reluctantly admitted rays of smeared light. It looked out across a canal no wider than a drainage ditch.

The furnishings of the room were halfway between sparse and nonexistent. They consisted of a brass bed, a mattress losing its ticking, a sheet and two blankets hair-thin with age, a pillow with no case, a chair, and a table with hand-carved legs. The table sat in front of a crucifix attached halfway up the wall. Several designs of wallpaper showed through. A light switch helped a little by activating a twenty-five-watt bulb hanging from a cloth-covered cord leading to an open hole in the ceiling.

A cheap suitcase was on the table. The spare set of trousers, three clean shirts, and some underwear had been removed and tossed back, probably by the police. A razor, shaving-cream can, toothbrush and paste, and a soiled towel lay on the end of the table where a porcelain bowl and pitcher awaited the next user.

Hawk ran a hand through the clothes and then lifted a corner of the mattress. He intended to make only a cursory search. The less time spent in the room the better. The smell was stifling.

"The police must have searched," he said. "It wouldn't take long. Did they find anything?"

At the door, only one foot still inside the room, Ceperley said, "Yes. They found a stack of clippings from Italian news magazines dating back several years. Gristle must have sat in a library and cut them out. They were all about terrorist bombings, kidnappings, hijackings . . . things like that from around the world."

Hawk's eyes widened with interest. "Did the police turn them over to you?"

Ceperley shook his head. "Nope. But the authorities weren't too interested since most of the incidents reported in the

clippings had taken place in other countries. I think the cops expected me to pay for the damage done to the library periodicals.''

Mike pulled the straight-back chair from under the table and sat down. One leg was shorter than the others. He let his eyes roam slowly about the room, searching for a hiding place. When he had lived in places like this, the first thing he did was hunt for a place to hide whatever valuables he couldn't carry on his body.

''How did the cops get your name?'' he asked idly.

''That Grissen shit had my name and address written on a piece of paper in his wallet as his next of kin. I had to come up with a twenty-buck bribe or pay for burying him. And I got no place to send his effects.''

''The wallet empty?''

Ceperley snorted. ''This is Italy, you remember, boy.''

Mike smiled to himself. Yeah, he remembered. In particular he remembered a day in Naples some seven years before. He had disembarked from a cargo ship after hitching a cheap ride from Spain. He had rushed to the railroad station only to find the train across the country to Brindisi out of commission in one of the country's routine strikes. He'd managed to beat the crowd to the Hertz rental office across the plaza from the terminal and had reserved the last car they had available. While he waited for the car to be brought around for him, he had made the mistake of asking a tourist cop the best way to the toll road leading east out of the city.

He got help, all right. A word from the tourist official, and the young man at the Hertz counter apologized profusely that he had been wrong about the car. There was none available. With phony Italian politeness the helpful cop had walked Hawk to the nearest cab stand, negotiated with a driver, and escorted Mike to the waiting Mercedes. With broad smiles and subtle hints he made it obvious that Hawk either take the cab or go to jail. A tip, of course, was not necessary but . . .

When the meter registered over two hundred dollars, Hawk reached Brindisi. There the conspiratorial cabbie demanded a tip, too, and started to go into a tirade that had a way of attracting authorities. Infuriated, Michael Hawk had grabbed the driver's collar. He twisted it so tight that the only other sounds he had heard were hissing noises like those you could

make by stretching the end of an inflated balloon and letting a whistle of air escape slowly.

Yes, he remembered Italy.

"Could you get the clippings from the police somehow?" he asked the news bureau chief.

The older man shook his head. "Nope. But it figures they had some connection with Gristle's death."

"Yeah, it figures." Hawk stood up and moved around the room again, lifting, poking, and shoving what little there was to check. The police had already stripped the lining from the suitcase, looking for a false bottom or top. And litter on the floor indicated they had torn off more of the wallpaper looking for a hiding place. They had checked the bed thoroughly and the hole around the light cord in the ceiling. Several loose boards had been pried up from the floor.

The tall American stood in the center of the room. He kept turning slowly. He felt that strange tickle of awareness skipping up his spine again . . . like somebody . . . something . . . a presence watching, surrounding. Was it his imagination or just the stench or was it just a shade harder to breathe in here?

The whole thing was eerie. The longer he stayed in the room, the more it piqued his curiosity.

But was it worth getting involved in a situation when his intuition seemed to be picking up warning signals? He had felt the same sensation in the exercise yard at Folsom Prison with some of the hardest men in captivity. He was surrounded with evil there; he felt the same way here.

"You think you could pinpoint where Gristle was searching when he was ambushed?" he asked Cep. "Not much chance of finding what he was after if we have to search all those channels and mud flats that fill the lagoon. It stretches for miles back from the Lido. It would take years if you didn't have it narrowed down."

"Well, I could narrow it down for you, but you'd still be tied up for months. Worse than searching for sunken galleons. Gristle's launch was moving at top speed when they were shot up. He might have traveled a couple of miles before the hit men caught him."

"I haven't got months," Hawk said, sitting down again.

For a minute he tried to pretend he was Gristle Grissen sitting here in this room, about to go searching for something important buried in the miles upon miles of channels and mud

flats that stretched in both directions from Venice proper.

He must have known precisely where he was going.

He had to have had a map.

But he wouldn't take it with him, Mike thought. Gristle was like a mouse when he was on a story. He scurried so fast from cover to cover that you saw no more than a blur. He never went straight to his hole either. He didn't leave clues where he concealed his nest.

"Gristle wouldn't take the map with him," Hawk said aloud.

Ceperley didn't ask what that meant. He had seen his former employee work before. Mike talked aloud to himself when he thought.

"He sure as hell didn't leave it in here," Cep said. "Either that or the cops took it with them, thinking Grissen had found a stash of gold."

Mike grinned triumphantly.

Unlike the cops, he accepted the fact that he wasn't so damned good at searching a room as he had thought. He gave himself a minute to figure out what he had overlooked and then rose confidently.

He picked up the chair he had been sitting on and turned it over so he could see the bottom of the wooden seat.

The four corners of a map were glued to the underside.

"What have you got?" Ceperley asked. He came into the room, shivered, and tried to see from as far away as possible. It was the first time Mike had known the old news hound to show such reluctance. Or was it fear? Cep didn't like the aura about the room any more than Hawk did.

"City map," Mike answered.

"Got any marks on it?"

"Nope." Hawk carefully pulled the corners free from the wooden seat. It was wrinkled and crumpled as though it had been carried around in a dirty pocket for a few days. Despite the fact that there were no marks on it, Hawk knew he had what he wanted. The map took in more than the city. An inset showed the lagoon the length of the Lido, the twin strands of land that held out the Adriatic to the south of the city and past Torcello on the north and east. The channels and tidelands were all indicated with that precise detail one sees sometimes in the first drawings of a child who later turns out to be mad or a genius.

There were no marks except for a tiny X that designated where the building they stood in was located.

"Shows where this place is," Hawk told his temporary employer.

"Glued to the bottom of a chair," Cep mused. "I guess that leech was afraid some kid would steal it from him and sell it to tourists for a couple of centesimi. Only that doesn't make sense. You can't carry a chair with you when you're trying to find your way around town."

The younger man turned the map over in his hands. He moved closer to the window and squinted, with his nose inches from the paper. Then he held it up to the glass.

He saw what he wanted.

A pinhole. Only the tip had been poked through the paper, but it precisely marked a channel back of the Lido. By triangulation, using several structures shown on the map, he would be able to find the spot in the lagoon with less than a hundred-foot margin.

"Find something?" Cep asked.

"No." Hawk folded the map and put it in his pocket. Then he went back to searching. He stayed with it for a long time, even cutting off the bottom of the toothpaste tube with the razor and squeezing out the goo, until he was satisfied Cep didn't attach too much significance to the map. He didn't quit until the news chief gave in to the butterflies in his stomach.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "This smell is getting to me. If you can't find something, maybe Gristle didn't have anything worth looking for."

Hawk agreed.

Outside and back at the launch, he said, "Can you afford to pay me for a few more days, boss?"

The old eyes brightened. He wouldn't admit it to himself, but he knew he had made a mistake years before when he bullied the young Michael into quitting. The man had a nose for news that twitched at the least whiff of a lead. Ceperley knew now that Hawk had gleaned some detail from the room, the map probably, but he wasn't about to admit it. Hawk would come up with something. He always did. Maybe not what and where and when assigned. And sometimes he took some damn fool chances, but he produced.

Cep tucked his thoughts inside a dour visage. "Yeah, take what time you need. I guess I owe you that for having you

drive all the way up here from Rome," he said grudgingly.

Hawk eyed him. "Yeah, you owe me that."

And he thought about the map in his pocket.

What was so important about a pinhole in a city map?

Why had the tension gone out of his body when he left the stinking, dingy apartment where Gristle Grissen had last holed up?

Michael Hawk had to know.

4

Mike was alone when he left his hotel on the Grand Canal shortly after dark. The wintry wind was trying to push the birds from the pilings that marked the channels through the lagoon. They clung pugnaciously to their perches. With low tide a few more huddled together in patches where the muddy bottom lay exposed. They were illuminated by a nervous moon that couldn't decide whether to hide behind clouds or come out into the open to help the captains of the launches and water-buses still plying the canals and open water.

Hawk had left Ceperley off at the news bureau office and checked into his hotel before he began his first tentative search for the point marked on the late Gristle Grissen's map. His decision to make the first excursion after dark was purely practical. He did not care to follow in his dead colleague's footsteps across the mud. He would risk being off the mark in preference to being murdered for his curiosity.

In the launch he steered a course from memory, past the spindly sticks stuck in the shallow water to mark the fishing nets of the American monks. They lived technically inside the city, which legally took in some of the mainland and the nearby islands.

Twice Hawk drove the bow of the launch aground, but he easily backed off until he found the channel he wanted on the mainland side of the long narrow spit called the Lido. The

high-rise hotels were visible even when the moon was playing coy, but he had to wait for it before he could orient himself enough to find approximately the spot where Grissen had been searching.

"Sunny Italy, shit," Mike said aloud as he cut the engines and let the cold wind drive the launch against the side of the channel.

He was not dressed for the weather. He still wore the sports jacket that hid his gun. It did little to keep out the wind, even when buttoned with the collar turned up.

His body stiffened against the chill, denying the goose bumps that wanted to invade his skin. Or was it more than the wind that tensed his muscles? How much of it was that same eerie anticipation he had felt in Gristle's barren apartment? As it had before, that feeling rekindled memories: Cambodia and Africa, where he had seen empty-eyed children holding bony arms over bellies bloated by starvation. It was worse when you knew men, not nature, had caused such plagues. It was terrifying to think leaders could allow inhumanness to go unchallenged.

Viewing mass graves or watching gory executions made an agnostic like himself believe in a living devil, even while he could not accept prescribed descriptions of God.

Strange to be having such notions here, he thought, in the half-lit gloom of early evening.

He had to stand on the front seat to survey his position. Then he saw what he was looking for. There were two houses visible, rising from the mud flats back toward the city. There was another in the opposite direction that was much closer. Anyone watching from there would have clearly seen what happened near here several days before. What's more, even inside the stone house it would have been difficul' niss the sound of shooting.

Backing into the channel again, he eased the launch around the bend, hugging the shoreline as closely as possible until he could make out the lines of a rickety dock protruding into the water. Two boats were already tied there, one smaller than his own with an outboard engine and another more expensive one.

Before he tied up, he cut the engine, listened, and looked about. From here he could see the window on the third floor under the inverted V formed by the tile roof.

Like the other rooms in the house it was lit.

He could clearly see a figure sitting or standing in the window. In spite of the silhouette effect, he was positive it was an older person, hunched and fragile. A woman, he guessed. Whoever she was, she did not move.

She must have seen him.

But the figure did not move.

As he climbed from the boat, a dog barked. By the sound of him, the animal was one of those house pets that specialized in fierce, if unconvincing barking. A large mongrel appeared at the end of the pier, only its head and tail visible in the shadows. The mouth was all threat. The tail was wagging.

"Come on, boy," Hawk said softly. "Come on."

He slapped his leg the way people do when they want a dog to approach. Humans might have no idea where the signal originated, but pets universally understood it.

The long-haired dog came forward tentatively, sniffed the outstretched hand, and welcomed the pat on the head. Obviously bored, the dog ran at the newcomer's side as he made a straight approach to the front door of the house. Mike was almost there, crossing a stone path through an unsuccessful flower garden, before he noticed something had changed.

The light in the upstairs room had gone out.

The front door opened. A man stood there with light at his back. He called out in Italian, apparently to the pet, but the dog preferred his new friend.

Hawk knew a little Italian. He knew a few words in a lot of languages, but his scant vocabulary was of little use here where the local dialect made comprehension nearly impossible.

"*Buongiorno*," he said. He depended upon his tone and inflection to dispel any threat his sudden appearance at the remote house in the dark might cause. "*Sono americano*." He spoke slowly, knowing he was likely to mix the words and phrases of a dozen languages he had picked up around the world. Experience had taught him you could get by with English throughout giant chunks of the earth if you used a sort of pidgin English, repeating words the locals might have learned from TV and films. "American. Does anyone here speak English? *Parla inglese*?"

"*Inglese*?" So distorted was the dialect that Hawk would

not have recognized the word if he had not just spoken it himself.

"Yes, English. *Americano*."

"American," a feminine voice said clearly from inside the house. "Yes, I speak English." He heard the words before the young woman appeared behind the man.

Hawk could see her better as the dog ran into the house, forcing the man to step aside.

The girl was more than he could have hoped for.

She was blond, not a bright yellow, but somewhere between that and a tawny light brown. He doubted if the hair was naturally curly, but it did sweep out in a carefully casual tangle of curls on either side of her face and turned under softly across her forehead. She was twenty-three or -four, he guessed, and she would still be asked for her ID occasionally in dark cocktail lounges in the States.

She was wearing a black knit dress. Unlike the shapeless garments older native women wore throughout much of the Mediterranean, whether they were widowed or not, this dress was modishly revealing. To the black the girl had added touches of red: a crocheted belt, trendy red-striped knee socks, and black spike heels that brought her within four inches of Mike's tall frame.

She had her hands folded behind her as though she were reluctant to interfere. When Hawk stepped closer so the light would hit him, she smiled; her eyes sparkled.

"I speak English," she said again in a clear Midwest-American accent. What she lacked in cool European suavity, she made up for in American warmth.

"Chicago," he guessed.

"Downer's Grove," she nodded. "It's a suburb."

"I know. I was born in Rockford."

The Italian stepped out of the way to let the two Americans talk. Mike was able to see more of him now. He was plainly fifty or more. He wore a white shirt and dark trousers. His hands said he had been a working man all his life, probably in one of the eyesore factories in Marghera. The idea for Marghera had been Benito Mussolini's. With Venice floundering in the Great Depression of the 1930's, the Fascist dictator had built the ugly industrial complex on the mainland northeast of the Rialto. Its purpose was to provide work for the inhabitants.

Practical Italians had built a bridge, an unimaginative cross-

ing, to the main islands. Now those preferring this entry to one of the most beautiful cities on earth drove first through slums and industry. They parked on the mainland and walked across or took water transport. But the city was meant to be seen first from the sea. The visitor should enter via great steps of white marble and cross under a classic triumphal arch. He should look up to see two massive domes rising in majestic splendor. Approaching through the industrial section of Marghera was like seeing your bride an hour before the wedding, wearing her mother's old dressing gown and her hair in curlers.

The face of the man in the house reflected years of hard work; he was too young, however, to have fought in Mussolini's cockamamie war.

Apparently he spoke no English at all. He left the conversation entirely to the girl.

"I'm Michael Hawk," the tall man introduced himself. At the same time he presented his passport and his press identification card to help explain his uninvited appearance on their doorstep.

The girl recognized his name. "I've seen your articles in the newspapers and news magazines," she said. "I think I saw you on television once. You do the most intriguing news stories."

"Thanks," he said.

She introduced herself and stepped aside to invite him in. "I'm Regina Tirelli," she said. "Do come in."

The name struck a computer key in his memory.

Tirelli. He rolled the name over in his mind as he entered the small, sparsely furnished living room of the home. Flames danced in the fireplace, adding more light to the room than the single lamp. Cheap furniture was arranged in a crescent around the warm bricks of the hearth.

Tirelli. Now he remembered. There had been a Vincent Tirelli in Chicago during bootleg days. Unlike most of this godfather type, he had made his fortune and gotten out of the business. At least that was the story. He had also gotten out of his long-term marriage and married a young society girl whose family had more social position than money.

Remembering pictures he had seen of Vincent Tirelli's second wife, Hawk came up with an interesting thought:

could this girl standing before him be the product of that May and December mating?

"I've been staying with friends in the city," the girl was saying. "I stop over to see my cousin, Giovanni, occasionally."

Hearing his own name, the man called Giovanni stuck out his hand and warmly welcomed Hawk to his home. Regina translated for them as they settled into chairs.

Giovanni bounced up immediately, fetched a bottle of wine and three glasses. He had them poured before Hawk could get in a question. "Vino," he offered.

"I came on a business matter," Hawk began.

Regina watched him curiously, and he wondered if her evaluation of him was as favorable as his of her.

"I wondered," she said. "I couldn't imagine who was coming to the door. My cousin is so isolated here. I don't understand why he doesn't move closer to his work. But you said you came on business, Mr. Hawk."

"Yes." Mike had to force his mind back to the questions he had come to ask. "Several people were killed near here a couple of days ago."

"Yes, so I understand. But I'm surprised you're interested. It doesn't sound like the type of thing you'd write about. At least, not what I've read."

"A friend of mine was among those killed." He was stretching the definition of the term "friend."

"Oh. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry too that I can't help you. I'm staying in the Palazzo da Vinci on the Grand Canal."

"Perhaps Giovanni could help. He might have heard the shots."

She spoke to her cousin, and the man's mood grew fearful. He squirmed; he sputtered; he seemed undecided whether he should tell the truth or not. Hawk could appreciate the man's position. If the killing involved the Mafia or any of the modern-day terrorists who were making Italy sound like the Old West of Jesse James or Billy the Kid, the man would be reluctant to say anything.

The girl, however, translated a positive answer.

"Yes, Giovanni did hear the shooting, but he didn't go outside or see anything. He thought the shooting was a considerable distance from here and . . ."

"And he was afraid," Hawk said. "Quite naturally."

"Yes."

"Did anybody else in the house hear or see anything?"

"No. Giovanni lives here alone. He's never married."

No one else in the house? Hawk asked himself. The answer didn't quite jell.

Timing was the question. He had seen the figure in the third-floor window of the house as he approached. The light had flicked out there seconds before Giovanni had answered the door. There hadn't been time to switch off the light and rush down the stairs to the entrance. Or if either of the two cousins had made the dash down two flights of stairs, he wouldn't have been greeted so calmly. One of them would have been panting from exertion.

One or both of them lied. Or the light on the third floor could be switched off from below.

Either possibility presented questions.

"I'm sorry we can't be of more help," Regina said sympathetically.

She stood, abruptly ending the visit.

But Giovanni had not moved. He ran a nervous hand through his dark hair and then clutched his wineglass in both of his strong hands. He was not at ease.

Nor was Mike. Again he felt that strange sensation he had experienced in Gristle's shabby room. It was as if a window had been opened a crack, letting an unseen draft chill the room, even though the fire danced higher.

Only Regina seemed unaware of any change.

"Well, I am sorry we couldn't be of more help," she repeated. "There are other houses in the vicinity, but as I understand it, they would be still farther from the scene. Ghastly business, wasn't it? I do hope they find the killers, and I'm sorry about your friend."

He leaned around her and spoke to Giovanni. "*Grazie*, *Signore* Tirelli," he said.

Since neither corrected him, he surmised the two shared the same last name.

"If there's anything else we can do, Mr. Hawk?"

He shook his head, then tried for another snippet of information. "No, I imagine Mr. Tirelli will be up late as it is, taking you back to the city."

She smiled. "And he gets up so early to go to work."

"Marghera?" Mike suggested.

"Yes, he works in a bead factory. Where they make those Venetian beads for necklaces."

Hawk smiled. "Yes, I've bought a number of strings when I was in Venice some years ago. They make good gifts." He changed the subject. "Perhaps I'll see you again, Miss Tirelli. I'll be in Venice for a while, and if you're not . . ."

She laughed. "If you're asking am I married, engaged, traveling with someone, or living with a male friend here in Venice, the answer is 'no.' And, yes, I'd enjoy visiting with another American. The people I'm staying with speak fluent English. So do their friends, but it's not quite American."

"I'll call then."

"You'll have to get the phone number from information if that's possible here," she said. She made no effort to be circumspect. "It's under the name La Scala. Attila La Scala."

Mike's expression communicated his interest in the odd name. "Yes," the girl continued, "it is unusual. No connection to the opera, though. And I know you are wondering how his parents came up with that combination. He was born during World War II, I'm told, and it was some kind of tokenism for the occupying Germans."

Unusual indeed, Mike thought. Attila was one of the Huns who drove the original Venetians onto the island.

At the door the dog came forward and stood beside Hawk. He had to be called back inside before the door could be closed behind the American.

Hawk hesitated outside, holding his position, listening.

Once in a while, he knew, you could pick up a reaction after you had left a room. But the conversation inside remained low-key, especially significant in Italian, a language that easily turned excitable.

Something was wrong, though.

Giovanni Tirelli claimed to have heard the shooting. On a weekday? Why wasn't he at work?

Curious.

It wasn't much, but Hawk had the odd feeling the question tied the house into the shooting.

And the lights from the third-floor window. It had to mean there was a third person in the house.

But the girl had denied it. A lie? he asked himself. Possibly two?

Again curious.

It was the type of small detail that Hawk had never missed as a reporter.

The questions were enough to make him look at the house again, upward, at the third floor. The moon gave him a break, and he was able to see the vines and the gaps between the stones. A good second-story man could make the climb without difficulty.

Whether a thirty-five-year-old Hawk, grown a little soft in nearly a year of wealth, could make it to the top without falling was another matter.

He would hate to break his neck or a leg, he thought. After all, he had just made a date with a beautiful American who could speak Italian.

Based on first impressions, he would bet she could communicate in another language too—body language. He was certainly ready and willing to investigate the matter further.

5

The launch had backed away from the dock and roared along the channel in the direction of the city. Then Hawk throttled down slowly so it would sound as though the boat were putting distance between itself and the house. Actually Hawk steered only a block away before he pulled in where brush overhung the water. He ran the boat into adequate concealment and sat shivering for more than an hour before he heard the other launch leave the house and start toward the Rialto.

With clouds covering the full moon, he could make out two vague shapes in the other boat, but as it passed between him and the lights of the city, he was relatively certain Giovanni and Regina Tirelli were both aboard.

When they had rounded the first bend in the meandering waterway, he climbed over the bow of his own boat and bulled his way through the underbrush until he stood on solid ground in the open area at the rear of the house.

He went around the front, took one more look at the vines leading up the stone walls, and decided he was no Errol Flynn or Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. from the swashbuckling days of old movies. He would break in on the ground floor and go up that way, he decided.

But he was surprised to see the light glowing again in the

upper window, and he worried that he might be making a mistake. Anyone from a child to an armed killer could be waiting for him up there. Yet, as usual, his curiosity was stronger than his common sense.

Inside the dog barked without conviction when Mike tried the latch. It was locked. All the lights except the one on the top floor were out. The frugal Italians wasted not and trusted not.

An old window, though, gave in to pressure, and Hawk crawled in to the furry, wet-tongued welcome from the dog.

"Sh-h-h," Mike cautioned him. The animal understood as little English as his master. A couple of minutes of petting was required to stop him from jumping playfully against his visitor. "Good dog. Stay. Stay."

The animal trailed Hawk to the bottom of the narrow stairs that led up from the rear of the living room. The embers in the fireplace helped, but as he mounted the stairs, Mike found himself in near total darkness.

The dog didn't follow. He stayed below whimpering.

Mike stopped, trying to read the animal's clue. Maybe upstairs was off limits except for people. Maybe the pet disliked losing his new friend so soon.

"Shit!" Mike exclaimed.

A draft from above chilled him. It snaked down the staircase, carrying an unpleasant smell. The house had had a cozy lived-in feeling to it when he had sat in the living room with Regina and the man, but now it was uninviting.

Running his hand over the walls, Hawk hesitated. The plaster was icy and dank, yet the staircase was in the center of the house. The fireplace should have left the stairs fairly comfortable.

His fingers touched sagging, cloth-wrapped wires just above the old handrail.

They puzzled him.

He knew most of the buildings in and around Venice had been wired for electricity long after they were built. Most of them predated Edison by a century or two, but the general practice had been to run the lines outside the house to the upper stories.

The sag in the wires suggested they had been installed years before by an amateur. It explained one way, though,

that the upstairs light might have been switched off, he thought. But why?

The damned house was full of questions.

He took a few more steps before pausing when the old boards under him creaked with age. The draft grew colder.

"Your imagination," he muttered to himself.

Normally too fearless for his own good, tonight his hand went to the holster under his jacket. He removed the gun and made sure there was a tround in the firing position of the ugly device.

"But how do you stop a draft with a bullet?" he asked himself.

He wanted to laugh at his own caution, but he was experiencing the same unexplained tension he had felt in Gristle Grissen's dingy room. He forced himself to finish the first flight of stairs.

He stood in the dark and squinted into several rooms that opened off the small hallway. With every door it took him a second or two to realize every room was alike.

Empty.

There was no furniture. The louvered shutters which closed across each window made it necessary to light a match to convince himself.

The floors were dust covered. The corners where the walls and ceiling met were laced with spiderwebs. Most of the webs had long ago been deserted by the insect owners who had learned that nothing alive entered their traps.

And Michael Hawk felt strange.

For no reason.

The emptiness, the rusting of the hinges, and the spiderwebs created the feeling of a séance. His own reactions didn't jell with his pragmatic approach to the unknown. He was tempted to hold back—for no reason.

But the empty rooms made no sense. It meant Giovanni slept on the first or third floor.

Why not the second?

And that damned chill. It was cutting clear through to Hawk's bones while his face felt flushed with excitement.

It was as if Walt Disney Productions had outdone itself in creating a haunted house.

The mental aberrations were purely psychic, he knew, yet he didn't want to go further.

Could he come this close and not go on? Could he allow himself to be turned back by some cerebral phenomenon?

"Just halfway up," he told himself aloud as he considered the flight of stairs to the third floor.

The house probably had no connection whatsoever with Gristle Grissen's death, yet it held that tempting lure of a story on its own.

Seven steps up when he might have turned back, he heard the labored breathing that so often accompanied the ESP sessions he had attended when he had written that story years before.

And there *was* a light at the top.

He climbed high enough until he could see over the floor.

The light came from beneath a door to his left. To his right was another room, the door open. The room was as empty as those he had already seen.

The whole damned house was weird. He was caught between the whimpering of the dog below and the asthmatic breathing from the room ahead of him. The structure of the old house amplified sounds until he felt they pelted his ears, merging with the warning thuds of his own heart.

His decision to go on was pure pride. He didn't want to think of himself as a coward, afraid of imagined enemies. Danger hardened his resolve. With the real threats he met in his world-hopping life, he could not get to the point where he didn't trust himself. Nothing in the parapsychology line could be allowed to deter him. Too often he was his own salvation.

Sternly he moved himself to the door, found the knob, and turned it slowly. Unlike the others in the house, the knob twisted silently, suggesting it was used regularly.

He opened the door a crack until he could peer in.

Then he stared into the past.

6

As an avid buff of old radio and movie nostalgia, especially that dating between Al Jolson's first sound picture in the late 1920's and the advent of mass TV in the early fifties, Michael Hawk could date the room instantly. From the films he knew World War II almost as well as the more recent wars he had covered personally.

The bed wasn't brass like the one he had seen in Gristle's room. It was walnut with a curved headboard flanked by two rather thin poles lathed to look like dwindling wooden balls piled on top of each other. The footboard was a miniature version of the same design.

The chifforobe dated back to the Depression era, but the overstuffed chair in the corner was mohair with crocheted rectangles to cover the worn places on the arms. The dressing table had the standard two drawers, one on each side, the short legs below, the mirror above, and the padded piano-stool-style seat in front. The rug was threadbare, but he could make out the heavy pattern typical of the era.

The miniature altar in the corner with the Virgin Mother, Child, and crucifix was strictly Catholic. Interpretation of the figures had changed through the years, and he doubted that even in Italy he would find many with that particularly insipid

expression on Mary's face. The benign emptiness had dominated religious statuary during the Depression and the war years.

The chest of drawers matched the bed and dresser.

The pictures on the wall were strictly 1940's.

The Fascist leader Benito Mussolini stared out from one. His jutting jaw was capable of convincing the viewer that he had won the war for Italy. In truth he had ended up hanging by his heels in a gas station with his mistress. His body had been riddled by the partisans, the Italians who had turned on the Fascists when the war proved hopeless.

Beyond Mussolini's picture was another which was equally rare in the modern world.

Adolf Hitler danced his victory waltz in France inside a cheap picture frame that boxed him in as the Russian encirclement had done in Berlin decades before.

Another Nazi, this one unrecognizable, peered from a picture standing on top of the dresser. The man was a general, Hawk guessed, although he was not an expert on Nazi uniforms and ranks. The man could have been a member of the elite and feared SS force. At least the uniform appeared to be black with gray spots that might represent the red spots on the collars of SS troops. The years had faded the picture, but the glass covering had been recently cleaned.

What dated everything precisely was the calendar hanging to the right of the dresser. The picture was not significant. It was a pastoral scene probably done by some long dead artist, but the date was clear enough for the most near-sighted sleuth.

"*April* 1945."

As if that weren't enough, faint pencil lines were visible. They crossed off the squares representing the days until the twenty-seventh.

"April 27, 1945." Hawk said it to himself, but the date did not ring any doorbells deep in his mind.

He recalled enough to know that Italy had surrendered to the invading Americans long before that date. Surrender had made it the battleground between the Allies and the slowly retreating Germans. He also knew the war had not ended in Europe until May. The exact day escaped him.

So April 27, 1945, meant nothing to him. But it had to someone, the room's occupant, no doubt. A long-awaited return perhaps. A son or lover's furlough. He didn't know,

but souvenirs on the chest of drawers spelled a military tie-in. One stand-up frame was filled with German medals and insignias of rank. On the left was an American soldier's World War II helmet. The crushed steel on one side suggested the wearer's fate. There was also an American .45-caliber automatic and a bayonet taken from an M-1 rifle.

Hawk had no doubt they represented three dead Americans. They would be long forgotten men whose own families rarely thought of them after so many years.

Yet here they were in the third floor of an Italian home.

The objects were like ghosts.

Briefly Hawk wondered if the dead Americans were reaching out to him from the grave. Did they want something from him?

No, his news sense told him.

The eerie secret of the house lay in some other direction. So he stepped closer to the chest of drawers. There were several pictures of Giovanni. He must have been in his early teens when the last one was shot. Next to the picture was one pair of leather baby shoes and a single knitted bootie. The latter was for a younger child, yet it had weathered the years better than the shoes.

Before he saw the figure in the wheelchair at the window, he spotted several other bewildering things about the room. One entire wall was pierced with holes the size bullets might leave.

The unnatural foreboding swelled inside him with almost irresistible force. He felt he was moving through air the consistency of jelly.

He was into an arena he didn't understand. A room that had stood still for decades. Unchanged yet lived in.

He was in a mausoleum, the dead, the living, and the living dead all in one room.

When he saw the wheelchair and the old spotted, vein-crossed hand clutching the arm, he was not surprised.

He only wondered who sat there.

"Excuse me," he said. "*Scusi*. Don't worry, *per favore*."

He felt compelled to speak. He would think of an excuse for his presence in the house.

His boat had broken down. Yes. That was it. His boat had broken down and he had made it back to the house hoping to hitch a ride to the city. He had come in when no one

answered his knock and after he had seen the light burning on the third floor.

"I'm sorry; I don't speak Italian."

The figure didn't move.

He went farther into the room. Every step took an effort. The draft was impossible here. The steel of his gun felt ice cold, and he had to put it back into its holster. Yet his hands were perspiring.

"Hello. *Buona sera.*"

His first thought was that the figure in the chair was dead. But a finger twitched.

The movement made him jump.

"Christ!" he said aloud. Since when had he been so jumpy?

For no apparent reason his mind picked German words from his language memory banks. They attacked his mind, shouted in a hoarse, harsh, insane voice.

". . . abscesses caused by internal and external poisons, cauterized until the living flesh was burned . . . shot . . . until the living flesh was burned . . . killed."

He heard the first wave of thunderous applause, a wild acclamation of devotion.

My God, he mumbled, He had dredged up scraps from a film he had once seen of Adolf Hitler during his rise to power.

What unearthly spell had dragged that madman's ramblings to the forefront of his mind? It was as if the speaker and the crowd surrounded the room.

Stiffening, he satisfied his practical mind.

Of course, the Nazi souvenirs on the dresser had spawned the rebirth of the words in his memory. Nothing supernatural about that, he reassured himself.

And another thing was obvious. The figure in the chair was deaf.

He walked closer while staying several steps from the wheelchair to alleviate as much threat as possible from his sudden appearance in the occupant's line of vision.

When he was off to the right and in front of the chair, he saw the face.

He flinched.

It was a woman's face. Or it had been once.

Now it was more than just aged. It was scarred and dim-

pled with deep ugly holes grooved by wounds that only bullets could make. The eye was gone from one uncovered socket. The lid did not quite close to cover a black pit that gave the impression you could see far into the brain where hellfires raged with unending torment. The left arm was only a stub. It was cut off halfway between the elbow and the wrist.

The sight could sicken a strong man, but Michael Hawk had seen worse. The globe was spotted with cripples, some mangled by God, others mangled by man.

The woman's hair was thin and white, revealing more wounds to the skull. He could only guess what ugly reminders were hidden in the wrinkled flesh beneath the faded, threadbare nightgown.

Then the remaining eye shifted and saw him.

The terror was immediate.

"Please," he said gently. "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you."

He was certain the old woman did not understand a word of English, but he hoped his manner was soothing. Soon her terror gave way to indifference.

"Can you speak?" he asked. "*Italiano*? I know a little." He tried to form the words carefully in the hope she could read lips or otherwise communicate with him.

His question was foolish, he realized. The chin and upper lips had been so torn and scarred that he doubted the woman still had a tongue. Except for the eye, she was probably paralyzed. The twitching finger signaled nothing; an uncontrolled nerve was sending out random signals.

Her mind must be mostly gone too.

The woman's eye lost interest in him and stared at her own reflection in the window.

Apparently her mind registered very little; she wanted only to stare toward the channel running in front of her window.

"You saw, didn't you?" Hawk said aloud for his own benefit.

He was certain he was right. The old woman probably spent her days and her evenings staring through the window until the man called Giovanni lifted her into the bed for the night. So she must have seen the shooting of Gristle Grissen by his assailant.

It explained why the Italian worker had been nervous when

asked about the shooting. He must have known the old woman saw.

Did the connection go beyond that?

Hawk had no way of telling, but the room and the woman were a story unto themselves. Perhaps he had stumbled onto something completely unrelated to Gristle's death that would provide him with a second article.

Gambling that the old woman had no way of communicating even with the man who took care of her, Hawk wandered about the room at will.

He found little that helped. There was a bedpan. Not much, but at least it showed she rarely or never left the room. There were extra quilts on the bed and no fireplace, no sign of heat in the room.

That posed a question.

Why wasn't the old woman cared for on one of the lower two floors? Venice could be miserable when winter gales came roaring up the Adriatic like invading armies.

Boldly he searched the chifforobe and the chest of drawers too. Everything was old. The free-standing closet was filled with gowns from the forties, spiked heels, hats, and hose that only a top-ranking military man could have gotten for his wife. Or mistress, Hawk thought as he remembered the picture of the German officer watching him from across the room and the decades.

Except for one newer robe, everything in the clothes cabinet was rotted and sagging with age. The hose were hardly more than stretched net.

The clothes must have gone untouched since the war, Hawk decided. Since April 27, 1945.

A few things in the drawer were new, however.

Diaperlike panties and rubber coverings made to adult size.

He felt sympathy for the woman in the chair. The abominable damnation of the aged. She obviously could not control her bowels or bladder, at least not as long as it took a man to cross the lagoon, work a full day, and return.

Yet what was missing interested him more. There were no medicine bottles in sight.

Unless Italians were totally unlike Americans, the woman ought to have the dressing table or the end stands on either side of the bed littered with bottles of vitamins, sleeping pills,

aspirin, and a pharmacist's shopping list of other medication.

He could see none of that.

So he dug deeper. In the bottom drawer near the bed with the oldest rags, he found what he expected.

A few prescription bottles. Not plastic. Glass, the way all medicine had been dispensed before industry plasticized the world.

He picked one up. The label was dirty and faded; he could read little, but picking up a second bottle, he was able to select letters from each until he had two facts. A date and the name of physician.

Again the same year: 1945. The same month: April. April 27 to be exact.

The doctor's name was Antonio Rossetti.

There was no reading the name or address of the pharmacist. A check of the remaining bottles told him nothing more so he put the two smallest in his pocket.

Then he turned for the door.

Another missing element struck him. There was not a magazine or a book in the entire place. Nothing except the old Bible near the miniature altar.

"Good God," he breathed. Hadn't the woman read anything in all these years? Hadn't someone sat and read to her?

Was she only a shell with no mind inside?

Was she Giovanni's prisoner?

The one fresh touch in the room dispelled that thought. He spotted the vase on the dresser.

It held a single red rose. It was slightly wilted, and the water was evaporating in the slender glass. One petal had fallen. But someone bought or picked the rose within the past few days.

Giovanni probably.

It explained why a man living virtually alone bothered with a small garden. He cared, whether the flesh in the wheelchair was able to comprehend or not.

No, the woman wasn't Giovanni's prisoner. She was a prisoner of her attackers. Her wounds were her shackles.

At the door Hawk stopped and looked at the bullet-pocked wall again. His eyes wandered to the bayonet on the chest of drawers. Making up his mind swiftly, he picked up the weapon and crossed to the peppered wall. Careful to avoid obvious marks, he dug in several of the holes until he could

ease out one of the long-buried slugs. It was in remarkably good condition, and he guessed it had been slowed by its passage through the woman's body before it hit the wall.

It would require calipers to measure exactly, but the bullet was smaller than a 9 mm Parabellum. If he was going to guess, he would bet it was either a 7.63 mm Mauser or the 7.65 used in the Luger. Both the Germans and the Italians had used the 7.65 in World War II. He was not so positive about the 7.63. Maybe an expert could pin it down for him, although he was not certain how it mattered.

Replacing the bayonet, he rotated slowly while he checked to see if there was anything he had missed.

So far he had a great many questions to work on but no answers. Nothing suggested there was any connection between the house and the death of Gristle Grissen except the paralyzed woman's position at the window and the possibility that Giovanni Tirelli might have lied about hearing the shots. If he had lied, it was a curious response. Why involve yourself in a gang-style execution unless it was completely necessary?

"Nothing more here," he told himself finally.

Then he looked at the woman once more, letting himself memorize the face.

No question about what had enfeebled her. She had been shot repeatedly. Machine-gunned, he guessed.

Someone must have left her for dead on April 27, 1945.

7

Michael Hawk sat in the glass-partitioned office where he could still hear the teletypes pecking out the news from around the world on cheap newsprint. Ceperley's miniature news bureau had not been modernized in years. The typewriters weren't even electric. They were old and manually operated while most American newspapers were going into word-processing machines; no longer did reporters use paper or hunt and peck their way through their articles. The columns appeared on small TV screens in front of the writer's keyboards, enabling them to correct their mistakes easily with a spot of light that served as a cursor. They moved the cursor to the error by means of a special key, typed the correction, and electronically made the story available for editing on their bosses' own computer display consoles. From there the story could be set automatically for printing. It saved the media a fortune over the long run and drastically slashed the once well-paid craft of linotype operators. Union leaders priced the operators out of the market with ever-increasing demands.

In Cep's Venice bureau, though, the old prevailed. As a backwater of hard news the bureau rated two part-time reporters and no night staff. This suited the single-minded Ceperley. He could sit behind his desk and scan papers from around the

world until he fell asleep at his chair or walked to his nearby apartment.

Back issues of newspapers and magazines grew in stacks around him. The filing cabinets were littered with unfiled papers, a coffeepot, two stained cups, coffee cans (empty and full), and several unwashed spoons. He looked small behind his chaotic desk. When Hawk entered, he stuck out his chest and grunted.

"Strike out already?" he challenged.

Hawk found a chair, shoved a dictionary from the seat to the floor, and put both arms squarely on the cluttered desk. Without asking, he spread his arms like windshield wipers to clear a V of space. Now he could see the scarred wood of the desk top.

"Hey!" Cep protested.

"Don't shit me, Cep," Hawk said. "There's nothing important in your whole fucking office, including you."

"Damn you," Cep growled.

But his eyes widened as he saw the bullet Hawk laid in his hand.

"Where'd you get this? The police?"

Hawk didn't think the question was worth answering. "Find somebody who can identify what kind of gun fired the bullet," he said.

"Oh, now wait, big shot. I hired you. Identifying a gun from a single bullet isn't all that easy. Even if I find a real brain in the field, it might cost money."

"Do it," Mike told him. "If I find a ballistics expert, I'll turn in an expense account four times higher than you'd have to pay."

Cep snorted.

Moving on, Hawk grabbed a piece of paper from the mess; he turned it over to its blank side. He took the erasable pen from Cep's ear and wrote down the name Giovanni Tirelli. Under it he wrote the words "Venetian bead factory. Hours."

"What's this?" Cep asked irritably.

"Find where this Tirelli works. It's across the bridge somewhere on the mainland, and find out if he was at work on the day of the shooting."

"Whose shooting?"

"Grissen's, for God sake. You're getting more senile than ever, Cep."

"Watch the tongue, damn you. You're working for me."

"Find out if Tirelli left work early. In other words figure if he could have been at home when the shooting occurred."

"But who the hell is he?"

"I don't know. Now, have you got a phone book?"

"The Italians are almost as bad as the Russians when it comes to updating the phone directory." Cep plunged his hand into a pile of papers and produced a worn directory.

"Dr. Antonio Rossetti," Hawk said. "Is he still listed?"

Ceperley's fingers riffled through the pages. At one point he stopped and scanned names carefully.

"Grand Canal, near the Cavalli-Franchetti Palace," he said, impressed. He turned the book around and let Mike copy down the address on another piece of paper that the reporter took indiscriminately from the stacks in the sagging in-basket. "No office address. Must have retired with a stack of liras. Most of those old palaces were turned into museums. They cost so much to maintain."

Mike stuffed the paper into his pocket. "Does the date April 27, 1945, mean anything to you?"

The man across the desk drew a crumpled pack of Italian cigarettes from his pocket and lit one with a match. It was bent downward in the middle at a forty-five-degree angle, but Cep made no effort to straighten it.

He liked things bent, or wrinkled like his shirt, or cluttered. The world was that way. So was the news. He had a theory that you could not be a good reporter if you were neat, organized, or as sanitation conscious as most middle- and upper-class Americans.

"April 27," he said. "The war was still on. The big war."

Hawk became impatient. "I know that, but who occupied Venice then?"

"The Germans, I suppose."

"Suppose isn't good enough. Get the local newspaper morgue. See if anything big happened that day. Like somebody getting shot all to hell."

Cep slapped his palm on the desk. "Damnit, Hawk, there you go shagging your ass along some crazy tangent again. You're supposed to be investigating a killing that happened this week. But, hell no, you're worrying about something that happened years ago. You never stick to an assignment." His ire vented, he leaned forward on his elbows. "Does all this

. . . the bullet, the doctor, April 27, 1945 . . . have anything to do with Gristle's murder and what he was looking for?''

Hawk stood, shrugging as he spoke. ''Damned if I know.''

''You horse's ass. Aren't you listening to me at all? Gristle Grissen. You got that? He was looking for something when he got killed. That's the assignment. Understand? Now, tell me, do you know what I'm paying for?''

''One last thing,'' Hawk said. ''What do you know about somebody called Attila La Scala? Lives along the Grand Canal too.''

Cep shook his head. He couldn't keep up with Michael Hawk's thinking.

''La Scala? What makes you think he has anything to do with Gristle's death?''

''I didn't say it did.''

''Why the hell did you . . . aw, shit. Count La Scala is jet-set flesh. The beautiful-people crowd. In other words he's rich. A little older than you. The last of a long line out of the Golden Book. You know what that was?''

''The Venetian social register.''

''His parents died when he was an infant, and he was raised by a nanny and a lawyer. They were virtual recluses before he decided to hunt for a bride. Married young, but his wife couldn't have kids, it turned out. When she died in an auto accident, he holed up in that palace for a month again. Then he came out of seclusion and turned the place into a twenty-four-hour party, seven days a week.''

''Bubbly, bright, and filled with *joie de vivre*,'' Mike suggested.

''Huh?''

''The parties—full of life?''

''Yeah. Anyway, more celebrities from around the world show up there than you'd find at the Oscar award ceremony in Hollywood or at the General Assembly meeting of the United Nations. Oddball types too. Paroled killers, big buck white-collar crooks, Mafioso, activist priests from South America, and leaders from the provisional wing of the IRA. They all attend regularly . . . to titillate the fat cats, I suppose. Powerful people always do have a morbid fascination with killers and revolutionaries. I suppose that's because half of the rich in the world got that way through one kind of crime or another. But again, what's he got to do with Gristle?''

Hawk smiled. "Nothing. I just got a date with one of his guests, that's all."

"You bastard. You leave me all this legwork to do and you're going on a date. Hawk . . ."

Mike slipped through the door, stalked across the news bureau office, and went out into the unlit hall.

He laughed to himself. He liked giving his ex-boss a bad time, and Cep was going to spend hours running down the leads he had given him. Probably none of them meant anything, but Hawk was thorough, as long as he could con someone else into doing the work.

In the hall, lit by the usual twenty-five-watt bulb, he found the staircase and started down. The building had an elevator, one of those cages enclosed in ironwork found in many of Europe's older buildings. He knew from experience the damned things had a way of jamming after working hours when you couldn't get a repairman to release you. He preferred the steps.

Outside he crossed the narrow walk to the canal and climbed into his launch. It was a small step down from the wall to the boat. If Venice settled much farther into the lagoon or if the tides ran abnormally high, most of the city was going to have a foot or more of water in its first-floor rooms. It had happened before. After each flood the Venetians made a big international appeal, collected money from around the world to protect the priceless art treasures throughout the city and to do a little patching of the dikes and more dredging of the channels. Then they went back to everyday life, unconcerned with the next inevitable flood.

The Grand Canal that he turned into was a water version of the L.A. freeway, except the Californians were considerate, patient, and less likely to use their horns in hopelessly snarled traffic. To the Italians it was a rough game of water polo, and Hawk made his way slowly to his hotel. There he changed clothes, dined, and set out again.

He found the Rossetti palace on the third try. After tying his boat and using the brass knocker on the door of the fifteenth-century Palazzo de Rossetti, he waited impatiently until a weary, hunched old man opened the heavy wooden panel.

The front wall of the mansion was built flush to the edge of the canal and pressed against other old houses on either side,

as was common in Venice. Hawk had stepped from his boat directly into the entryway.

The old servant was not alone. A man with an Italian Beretta Moschetto, a form of machine carbine, stood to the side, leaning against a statue of the Virgin Mary. The gun was not quite pointed at Hawk.

The armed guard was no surprise. In Italy, if you had money, you'd best have highly trained bodyguards too.

"I'm Michael Hawk, an American journalist," he said loud enough for both men to hear. "I'm sorry I don't speak Italian well enough to trust my life to it."

"You're not on the visitors' list," the guard said in precise English. "Do you know the doctor?"

"No," Hawk admitted. "I just wanted to ask him a couple of questions. It wouldn't take long."

"No one may enter unless he is on the list," the answer came back.

"Wait," Hawk said. "Before you go any farther, I'd like to raise my hands."

"What?"

"I said I'd like to raise my hands to reassure you."

"Of what?"

"Let me get my hands up first."

The guard spoke to the old man in Italian, and the bent shape stepped away.

With his hands raised, Hawk explained. "I'm armed. A pistol in a shoulder holster."

He sucked in his gut, For a second he figured it might be the wrong thing to say, but he thought it was better than letting the man with the machine gun discover the Dardick pistol on his own. A man with a submachine gun had a way of spraying the neighborhood like a surprised tomcat if given the least provocation.

Silence followed.

The two men spoke in Italian; then the one who understood English came forward. He had Hawk slowly reach under his jacket and bring out the ugly duckling.

"This is a gun?" he scoffed. "What kind of bullets are those? I thought I'd seen everything."

"They call them trounds. Don't ask me why. Now can I talk to the doctor?"

"He quit practice years ago. He just likes the title." The

guard patted Hawk down and satisfied himself. "But he likes visitors, surprises too, in spite of his list. So walk slowly toward the room on your left. I'll be right behind you."

"Hands up?" Hawk asked.

"No need. Just don't make quick moves. Guards are a status symbol here, but occasionally we shoot just to stay in practice."

"You sound American," Mike said as they passed a waist-high stone urn overflowing with flowers.

"Ran my father's fish market in the Bronx for a few years until the supermarkets put us out of business. Here I carry a gun, sit on my ass, and live in a big house."

The guard opened the door and Hawk stepped into a dimly lit entry with magnificently inlaid bits of tile patterned into the floor. Life-size portraits that could have been the old masters hung from the walls. Hawk's dead wife had not shown him any of these on her art binges, but then this was a private collection. They could be worth a fortune.

He saw less than he wanted.

The guard motioned Hawk in ahead of him.

The Italian penchant for low lighting was carried to the extreme. The only person in the room, a man in his late seventies with white-streaked hair sat near the fireplace, a book tipped to his right so the flickering light illuminated the pages. A dignified man with a relatively good complexion for his age, he had very alert eyes. He took off his glasses when he realized he had a visitor.

The guard spoke in Italian.

The old man immediately became gracious. "Ah, Mr. Hawk," he said. "Well, I have a daughter living in the States. In fact, I have stayed with her through the summer. Sit down, please. I rarely have visitors any longer. I am becoming a recluse, I fear."

He indicated a chair across a low table. He seemed so casual, but Hawk noticed the guard had taken up a position behind his employer. While the submachine gun did not point directly at him, Mike knew he wouldn't make it halfway across the table before he was cut to pieces. The rich Italians were obviously prisoners of their own wealth.

"You are a journalist, I understand," Dr. Rossetti said. "You pique my curiosity. I cannot think how an old dis-

penser of herbs and legalized witchcraft can interest an American newsman.''

''You treated a patient years ago, Doctor. A Mrs. Tirelli. She lived on an island between here and the Lido.''

''Did I? I am afraid I never could remember my patients' names. When was the last time I saw her?''

''Possibly in 1945,'' Hawk answered.

''In 1945?'' Rossetti laughed. ''Surely you do not expect me to remember that far back, Mr. Hawk. I am not senile yet; if I were, there would be a chance. The very old remember the past more vividly than they do the present.''

''I think you might remember this woman, Doctor,'' Hawk persisted. ''She had been shot repeatedly. By a machine gun or a machine pistol, I should say. She was hit in the face and head. Her body too, perhaps. I don't know.''

The doctor cocked his head, his memory stirring up the worst of times.

''When in '45? April?''

''Yes, April 27, I think.''

''Oh, God, yes, Magdalena Tirelli.''

''Then you do remember?''

''Yes, oh yes. The day the partisans freed the city.'' The old man pondered the eyeglasses he was holding in his fingers. ''The Italian partisans, Communists most of them, freed Venice from the few German forces remaining in the area. They shot her.''

''The partisans?''

The doctor nodded. ''She was a collaborator. After Il Duce was ousted and Italy surrendered to the Allies. We were all German collaborators before that. Willing victims of our own lust for empire, our craving for order. Mussolini, he promised something for everyone. He recognized the Vatican. Protected the rich from the Reds. Gave jobs to the poor and made the trains run on time. Something for everyone. Then something *from* everyone . . . my brother, then my wife, my patients. They all died for him.''

''But you do remember Mrs. Tirelli?''

''Yes, yes. She was so badly wounded I could not move her. Besides, if I had taken her to a hospital, the partisans would have killed her anyway. I left her at home with her young son to care for her. It was inhuman, but I had no choice. There were so many wounded and sick, so many, and

so few doctors. And she had continued her affair with the German officer after she had been warned.''

''Then you are positive it was the Italian partisans who killed her. Because she collaborated with the Germans.''

The doctor looked puzzled. ''But of course. Who else would have done it?''

Mike could not think of an alternative. ''True,'' he said. ''Were they tried, these partisans?'' he asked.

''In a court? Hardly. They were heroes.''

Mike nodded. ''I see. And another question, Doctor. Was she in the habit of looking out the window of her third-floor bedroom?''

The doctor looked surprised. ''I never heard anything like that. The Germans occupied the first two floors, you understand. They were quartered there. I imagine that is how she became involved with the Nazis.''

''And have you treated her since?''

The old mouth moved in a humorless smile. ''Like many of my patients in those days, Mr. Hawk, she did not require my services for long. She died three days after she was shot.''

8

Sitting in the launch after the gates to the doctor's palace had closed behind him, Hawk evaluated what he had been told.

"She died three days after she was shot." The words repeated themselves in his mind. "She died three days after she was shot."

The doctor could be lying. It would not be too unreasonable. In the days following the shooting, to tell anyone otherwise might condemn her to another attack by the partisans who had wreaked havoc on Nazi sympathizers. Or perhaps the woman's son had nursed her himself out of that same fear. Either would explain why the doctor said she had died, and both explanations might easily fit with the woman's paralysis. Perhaps she had never spoken again; perhaps she remained a shell sitting at the window as Hawk had seen her.

But did she have any connection, no matter how remote, to the death of Gristle Grissen?

That question had no answer yet. Perhaps he was chasing two stories at once. Seldom did he make mistakes like that, though; his reporter instincts kept him doggedly on one trail at a time.

There was a connection, he told himself. He felt it.

Tomorrow he would take the most important step. He

would pick up the search Grissen's killers had interrupted. He would rent a wet suit, diving gear, a powerful waterproof flashlight; then he would search the area indicated by the pinhole in Gristle's map.

Tonight, though, he had a date. Well, he sort of had a date.

He had been alone again for several months since his last scrape in the States. He had gone into hiding as he so often did to stay alive, and the American girl he met at the old house had attracted him.

He dressed casually, uncertain after his talk with Ceperley what to expect at Attila La Scala's palazzo. As usual he traveled light, so light that he had been forced to stop at a haberdasher's shop that afternoon. He threw the place into turmoil when he ordered a Givenchy tweed barley jacket, brown worsted slacks, and a soft white turtleneck shirt for delivery in four hours. The men swarming around him at the shop had gaped when he openly showed them his holstered gun and insisted the clothes be cut to hide the bulge. They protested about the delivery time; they wilted, however, when he pointed from one part of the clothing displays to another.

"I'll take one of those and one of those," he said, "and that outfit over there, all fitted to my size, matching shoes, size 11 D, a half-dozen ties, six shirts (three casual, three dress)—I like silk if you have them—a half-dozen Jockey-type shorts, and socks. And some handkerchiefs. Anything else you think I might need. Send someone to a luggage shop to get me the suitcases to carry it. And have it all sent around to my hotel before dark. Watch your Italian pencil too. I'm willing to pay well, but I hate being cheated."

He rolled out the bills he guessed it would cost, insisted on a receipt, and pushed his way through the salesmen who had crowded about him during his half hour shopping fury. On his way out, he picked up a white London Fog trench coat with the classic epaulets and belted sleeves.

Now, as he rode through the night traffic of the Grand Canal, the occasional spray from the other boats didn't bother him.

The buying spree was typical for him. Money meant nothing; therefore, he could travel light, get himself reoutfitted in a matter of a few minutes at his next destination, and scatter some of his wealth around without the notoriety that attended large donations. The shopkeepers and their commissioned

employees benefited. More important, a note to the maid when he left a hotel meant entire wardrobes went to people working for the minimum wage.

The clothes gave him confidence, and he felt at ease with the La Scala mansion as he tied his boat behind the red and white barber-striped poles rising ten feet above the water.

The mansion was different from many others on the canal. It had a small ramp and then a tall stone wall topped with colorful-but-vicious spikes of broken bottles set in concrete.

The gate opened without his knocking. The servant who greeted him was elaborately polite. Expensive clothes, Hawk knew, won access to many a place forbidden to more common-looking visitors. He disliked the smug apartheid of the super rich, but like it or not, the butcher's son from Rockford, Illinois, was one of them.

The bastard rich sensed wealth like trained beagles skilled at sniffing out the fox. And they were all foxes. If they attained their wealth by working or by inheritance, it took a fox's cunning to retain money in these days of wild inflation, sporadic recessions, and volatile governments.

He wasn't surprised when the uniformed doorman at the wall invited him in before asking him to identify himself.

"I'm Michael Hawk," he announced without trying any Italian. "I've come to see Miss Tirelli."

He stood on the ancient stone walk between Venetian gardens, a carefully nurtured jungle of flowers, vines, and low-standing trees. Gardens were the only natural touch on the barren islands that had been paved over or covered with wall-to-wall buildings, small plazas, and narrow alleys.

He looked up to a multitude of floodlighted, finely sculptured angels, prophets, and saints who crowded the facade of the palace. Each statue humbly carried water urns for a reason Hawk imagined was lost in history.

Inside the wall the courtyard was lighted artistically; beyond the gardens the colored floods illuminated a thirty-foot patio of stone around the entire main building. The cleared space conjured visions of a dead zone between the inner and outer fences of a prison camp. The analogy was made more sinister by young Italians who stood at each of the two corners that Hawk could see. He assumed two more men guarded the other end of the mansion. Each carried a Beretta MP-38/42

submachine gun with a forty-round magazine. Two of the rapid-fire weapons were pointed casually at his torso.

The guards had positioned themselves near the building so they would not cut each other apart in the cross fire. The servant, though, was doomed if any shooting began.

From inside the mansion he heard the unmistakable sounds of a party: music, loud talking, and machine-gun bursts of laughter.

Suddenly he wished he hadn't come. Was some instinct for self-preservation trying to warn him? He didn't know.

Perhaps it was because he had only just met the Tirelli girl and knew he was pushing by coming to see her so soon.

Or perhaps it was part of that inexplicable foreboding that had swept over him at the Tirelli home.

The palace had a decadency about it that he had not sensed at the doctor's home. The garden was too much. The structure itself appeared to have been created by a master architect and sculptor who had abhorred straight lines and flat walls. Every inch was covered with statuary, bas-relief ornamentation, or carved scrollwork.

It made him think of a dying man trying to squeeze every pleasure, every excess into the last hours of his life.

That might explain the Venetian craze for overdecoration. From the beginning they had built their city with the barbarians at their moats; then had come centuries of wealth gained by hard, selfish trading that required force when the seller resisted the low prices that made merchant princes wealthy beyond measure. They must have thought then, as they had when the barbarians threatened them, that the sellers might one day rise and retake with force the exorbitant profits which merchants had extracted from the simpler, weaker people of the world.

Venice, though, had never been captured and sacked. Even World War II had left it relatively untouched.

It took the forces of nature to erode the city. Time, high tides, foundations sinking into the muck below, and the chemistry of polluted air on stone were slowly gnawing toward the innards of the city. These were the enemies of the island city today.

The party inside sounded like a wake: the living celebrating that they still lived. Moths dancing around flame.

He followed the servant, stiffly impersonal as a robot, to

ornate bronze double doors which opened with a touch of a button.

Then he was inside, traversing a succession of gleaming floors through vast rooms. Each room seemed more dazzling than the last. Here lights glowed from crystal chandeliers which would fill an average room. Walls and carved ceilings glistened with gold. In niches sculptured figures, museum pieces all, had turned flat, unperturbed eyes in the same direction for centuries. Paintings swarmed with legions of men, women, angels, and fat cherubs.

The *objets d'art* were limited to no one period. There was medieval body armor. Ax heads, some mounted on shafts up to six feet long, were crossed in displays among the other treasures. Swords of a hundred varieties were attached to the walls. There were many quillons, the crossbars that protected the hands, and some swords had grips long enough to accommodate both hands for extra power. There were spears, lances, pikes, crossbows, and early handguns.

All were grim reminders: the beauty that was Venice depended upon the ugliness of war.

But tonight the rooms ahead were loud with modern music, incongruous in this museum of other days and other nights, of art and blood from the past.

The clash of mood and era was disquieting.

Inured as he was to danger, Hawk was unnerved here, even before he saw the first lone man standing in the shadows of an alcove.

Young, tall, fair skinned, and blond, he was dressed in evening wear which somehow labeled him for what he was: one of Attila La Scala's bodyguards. No weapon showed, but it would be there under the dinner jacket or behind him in the deep shadows of the alcove. Hawk passed others stamped from the same mold. He had lost count before he was led into the glittering ballroom.

The motif remained the same, although the room had obviously been completely gutted and rebuilt. It was an indoor garden; a fountain played on colored lights in the center. There was a raised stone platform at the far end for the musicians—they looked American—who were playing disco and top forty selections. Around the fountain danced a motley assortment of guests. Their bodies moved to the international

gyrations symbolic of a world in turmoil—masses of people making frenetic, lustful motions.

There was no standardized dress for the evening. He saw formal wear (some with the sashes of ambassadorial rank across the breast). There were uniforms from a dozen lands including those of Mediterranean navies—Hawk recognized the officers with their ridiculous miniature swords, no more than eighteen inches long, hanging from their belts like the sabers of old.

Those in civilian garb were dressed in everything from formal attire to blue jeans and faded denim shirts. There were Japanese women in kimonos, Muslims in their long robes, Indian women in saris, even Cubans in fatigues worn in reverent imitation of their leader.

Hawk recognized some of the faces. He saw the American consul whom he had met when the man served in Denmark. There was a supercilious Hollywood type who lived in the South Seas and came out of seclusion to mumble his way through a new part or to front some antiestablishment demonstration. A resilient former minister of the exchequer from England, who had fled the government after years of service, taking with him the young woman at his side. A leader of the PLO; others, bombastic with braggadocio, from the militant IRA, including one who bragged about the bus he had destroyed while it was still loaded with Protestant children. A Roman Catholic priest who had gained fame using force to help the helpless in Brazil. The daughter of a late shipping magnate who had temporarily denounced her wealth for a stay in a Communist paradise. A member of the Japanese Red Army who roamed free although he hijacked planes the way some kids his age hitchhiked rides.

Pausing near one pocket of animated conversation, Hawk heard a Japanese terrorist speaking to a knee-jerk liberal TV star whose career horoscope was on the way down. "Terror is only a simplified paradigm of chess," the Oriental was saying. "Hijacking and bombing are the modern heraldry for the new knights without armor."

The TV type's eager nod reinforced what Hawk knew: in media intelligence and success do not necessarily cohabit.

He also saw a wealthy Swiss banker, a member of France's most influential family, blacks from the States and Africa, one of whom stood accused of cannibalism following the

slaughter of opponents who wrested the country from his control.

Hawk knew most of them; he had interviewed many, including the chain-store heiress whose life was a model of philanthropy and propriety.

The complexity of the guest list was mind boggling. Wealth or notoriety were the only common denominators among the dancers and those seated at tables beneath a pillared balcony on each of two sides of the circular room.

And the light shot from behind the room's stained-glass dome added to the bewilderment by casting an artist's palette of colors on the clothing and faces of the several hundred revelers in the room.

They chattered in a dozen languages, although English, the common bond, predominated.

Unable to reason what brought such a collection of celebrities together, Hawk followed his guide around the dance floor. Occasionally someone spoke his name, apparently not surprised to see the newsman in their midst. Publicity was one thing most of them liked. It was useless being famous if your name and picture didn't appear in the media on occasion. He would be inundated with attention before the evening was over.

Continuing across the room, they approached a tall man in basketweave slacks and a jacket by Jaguar. He was leaning with one hand against the wall, his back to his new visitor.

From behind Hawk saw first the dark blond haircut militarily short and a neck and shoulders that suggested strength and self-assurance.

Then Hawk's guide spoke to the man in Italian. Mike caught only the names: La Scala. Tirelli. Hawk.

The man hesitated for a moment before he took his hand from the wall and turned slowly, like an actor priming himself for a new role.

"Ah, Mr. Hawk," he said in slightly stilted English. "Michael Hawk, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Mike started to offer his hand for the usual introductory touching of flesh between men, but he noticed the other man, two inches taller than himself, made no move to do so. Instead he had taken a handkerchief from his pocket and was wiping his hand clean of some imaginary dust from the wall.

In a quick interchange that was almost too fast to notice, the guide who had brought Hawk into the room took a fresh linen handkerchief from a jacket pocket and swapped it for the one used to clean the palm.

"Mr. La Scala?" Hawk asked politely. His own palms were sweating inexplicably.

"Count La Scala," a familiar voice said near Hawk's elbow.

Regina Tirelli, smiling warmly, was even more beautiful under the colored lights than she had been at the lonely house on the mud flats behind the Lido.

The band had stopped the dance music. Instead it was playing a gallimaufry of national anthems.

Hawk felt a tinge of jealousy, a ridiculous sensation. He had met the girl only briefly, but he was discovering a proprietary interest that made no sense at all. It stung, though, to realize that La Scala had turned and had her practically pinned against the wall. It was a position a man took only when he was seriously interested in a woman. At least it was only then that Hawk tried to isolate a girl for himself by blocking her view of everyone else when he talked to her.

"Count La Scala," Hawk corrected himself, making a nominal accommodation to what he considered so much crap. He disliked titles. Your majesty, count, doctor, professor, general. They were all verbal means of degrading someone else. A man could grow rich performing unnecessary coronary bypasses, but the money wasn't enough. Some people demanded recognition as well, whether it was deserved or not.

To Hawk most men and women with a title were born dictators, only a circumstance away from ordering dissenters into the gas chambers. But it was better, he reasoned, to give them their petty titles than to have them seek recognition by deadlier means. The world had enough dictators. At any given time seventy or eighty percent of the world failed to maintain even a semblance of freedom from their tribal chiefs.

"It is not necessary," the count said with a wave of his hand. His voice was slightly atonic. "Attila, call me Attila. It is foreboding enough for a name."

Then the count shifted position and nodded toward an elderly woman propped in a wheelchair with a blanket across her legs and a shawl over her shoulders. "And this is my

aunt,'' Attila La Scala said. ''She lives here with me. She is the only parent I have known.''

The woman approaching her eighties, by Hawk's estimate, nodded without speaking.

Mike understood the need for the introduction. The old lady was the chaperon that made Regina's residence at the house respectable by Italian standards. He was not quite certain the arrangement satisfied his own loose sense of decorum.

The girl was wearing a stunning black silk gown that said dollars as eloquently as any price tag. There were diamonds at her throat. Despite the fact that there was no woman in the room more beautiful than she, the count's young houseguest was discomfited in Hawk's presence; he could sense it. Did she wish her entanglement with her host were not quite so obvious?

''I didn't expect to see you again so soon, Mr. Hawk,'' she said. ''Or may I call you Michael?''

''Please do,'' he nodded.

''Michael,'' she affirmed. As always women never cared to call him by the shortened version of his name.

Men preferred it normally, but this time La Scala took up Regina's lead. ''Michael, then. And Attila.''

La Scala was tall and light skinned for an Italian. It would be easy to mistake his appearance as the product of generations of Nordic inbreeding, but Hawk knew a few Italians who, like the Spanish, failed to follow the stereotype of black hair and olive skin that Americans associated with the Latin breeds.

His features were perfect. No scars, no blemishes, nose straight, eyes cool blue, mouth disarming when it smiled, and the complexion darkened by sun rather than the tint of nationality.

His manners, though, were upper-crust Italian; and when he called a waiter to bring Hawk a drink, there was no mistaking that Venetian was his native dialect.

Hawk felt the power of the man, that aura that exudes from people born or trained to lead. The Kennedys had it. Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Churchill in their time. Mao, Stalin, Castro—people followed them without needing a reason.

La Scala had that trait. It could be detected by the numbers at the party, leaders themselves in many cases, who swung

their attention to the Italian count, obviously wondering to whom he was talking now. Whatever he did would interest the people he gathered around him.

And yet Hawk had never heard of the count leading anything. His name had never come up in the stories he covered. He couldn't recall seeing it in any of the media. While he obviously remained open to most anyone, he had not made a name for himself in print.

"Regina has been telling me about you," he said.

Mike was surprised that his brief call at her cousin's home would have involved conversation with the count. He wasn't sure he wanted too many people knowing he was in town, let alone what he was doing.

"She says your friend was among the men killed in our latest outrage."

"Right," Mike answered. "A Mr. Grissen, a fellow newsman."

"Of course, the American." Attila ran a finger thoughtfully along his jaw. Hawk watched the gesture, wondering what it was that bothered him about the man. Nothing more than their mutual interest in Regina, perhaps. Yet as he looked into those cool blue eyes, he became aware of a thumping in his ears, a familiar cadence he could not place. What had his senses tuned into? "Unfortunately he seems to have been an innocent bystander in one of our—how do you say it in America?—gang-style killings. I understand the man who owned the boat was a Sicilian, not a Venetian at all."

"Oh." Hawk had not heard that before.

"There might be an explanation there," La Scala said. Then he smiled curiously at Regina. He took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. Apparently he was attempting to make up for his oblique reference to the Mafia and her father's past.

The girl smiled evenly. It was easy to tell that inside she was embarrassed by memories. She wanted to forget.

"Do you intend to investigate the case, Mr. Hawk . . . excuse me . . . Michael?"

The count's interest in the question was remote at best. He was already looking toward two Arabs in Western attire approaching him from across the room.

Mike thought he could avoid an answer, but the count smiled back at him. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

Hawk almost lied, then realized it made little difference. In the morning when he took a boat out to the site, he'd be seen regardless of what the people in the ballroom heard. The killers would be watching the scene for weeks. Or perhaps they had already returned and dredged up whatever Gristle had been seeking in the mud bottom.

"Yes, I guess so," he answered finally. "If it doesn't take too much time."

"Commendable," the count praised him. "But will you excuse me? I must mingle. Regina, will you show Michael about? Ask him to stay if you like. Surely there's a room somewhere in the palazzo. I would enjoy hearing about your exploits, Michael. Life in Venice is more cultural than active. I'm afraid I'm more a Roman at heart. Had I been born before Christ, I'm certain I would be leading legions into England or ruling the Jews. But one has to follow his destiny, doesn't he?"

Mike nodded. "Wherever it leads him."

"I like that. Wherever it leads him. Yes, I like that." The count walked away.

The tall American watched him stride between the Arabs and put an arm over each of their shoulders. They were laughing and talking in the language of the two dark-skinned men.

Hawk did not know how to assess Attila La Scala.

"He lives vicariously," Regina said as if she had read his mind.

"The count?"

"Yes. You'll see; he'll question you about the goriest news stories you've written, the wars you've covered, the action you've experienced."

"That's why he has all these people here?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you?"

Her eyes narrowed, her lips tightened ready to refuse; then she relented. "He invited me to hear me tell what I know about my father's past," she said.

"In organized crime?"

"Then you know."

"Yes."

"He's dead," she said. "So is my mother, and there's no way I can give back the money he earned, no way to separate

it from my mother's own meager wealth. If my father's past bothers you, Mr. Hawk, I'd much rather join the others. They could care less.''

She stepped away, but his hand caught her wrist.

''I don't give a damn about your father's past,'' he said. ''I don't think La Scala does either. You're a beautiful girl.''

''A rich, and beautiful, and very bored girl,'' she told him.

''I thought I detected that something, you know, in your eyes. At your cousin's house.''

She smiled and walked ahead of him through a door under the balcony and into another room that looked like a magazine spread. This one was a study, the book-lined, wood-paneled den of an English squire's estate. There were couches, two stone fireplaces, and a mahogany desk. No statuary here.

When the door had closed behind them, she leaned back, partially sitting on the desk. Then she answered his remark.

''You saw interest, Michael. Interest in a man who did things, exciting things. Things I'd like to do with you.''

''Including the most interesting of all?'' he suggested.

She didn't act surprised. Too many men had made more direct approaches to her. ''Perhaps,'' she said. ''But if you're talking about tonight or tomorrow night or . . .''

''I'm not,'' he said. ''I don't work on a timetable.''

''But would you take me along?''

''Where?''

''On your assignment. I wouldn't tell anyone if you let me help search for your friend's killers . . . tomorrow.'' She added the last as an appendage.

She was reading his mind, he thought. How did she know he was going to make the first big search tomorrow?

She read his expression too. ''You're not a man who goes about things slowly or cautiously,'' she explained.

''It could be dangerous,'' he warned.

''I know,'' she said. ''That's why I want to go.''

Ceperley handed the spent bullet across the desk as he said, "It's a 7.63 mm. Probably out of a machine pistol, circa the 1940's."

"Italian?" Hawk asked.

"No, German. An Erma Machine Pistol by Vollmer, manufactured at the Erfurter Maschinenfabrik." Cep had to refer to his notes for the details.

"What makes you so sure it's German made?" Hawk challenged. "Didn't the Italians use some 7.63 ammo too?"

"Mussolini's bunch? They used practically every caliber known to man. Screwed up their supply problems more during World War II than a well-placed atom bomb could have accomplished."

"Then how do you know?"

"That it's German? Damnit, Hawk, you shove your legwork off on me and then bitch. I took the damn thing to the best gun expert I know in Venice. He puts it under a microscope, weighs it, measures it, pours chemicals over it—to check the metal content, I suppose—and he spends one hour searching through a library of reference books. Then he turns to me, mumbles something about the markings, and tells me it was probably shot from an Erma. He charged me so many

thousand liras I'm going to need a calculator to figure out what it means in dollars. How should I know if the guy lied to me or not? It's like going to a doctor: You pay the son-ofabitch so much money you owe it to yourself to believe him even if it kills you.''

Hawk chose to ignore that dubious logic. ''At best, he gave you a calculated guess, but it's all we got.''

''All we got? What do you mean, all we got?'' The liver spots on Ceperley's face darkened when he grew excited. ''You've been on the payroll nearly twenty-four hours and what do you know? What I tell you. It's a bullet from a German gun. How's that going to help solve Gristle's murder?''

''I don't know,'' Hawk said. He scooted a typist chair in front of his own and hooked his legs over the back like kids did in theaters where the ushers weren't too particular. He folded his hands, blew into them to take away the chill, and stared at the ceiling. ''Interesting, though, isn't it? Somebody is supposed to have been killed by the Italian partisans, only the bullet turns out to be German made. The partisans could have taken the gun off a dead Nazi, of course. A lot of them took their weapons into the hills with them when the Italian army surrendered. Other guns they stole from the Germans. Some got supplies by parachute from the Allies. A few worked with the American OSS to run trainloads of contraband weapons in from Switzerland. That's how they closed the Brenner Pass so the Germans couldn't retreat into Germany for one last stand. They tied up thousands of Nazi troops in Italy and probably cut the war short by a month. If they had reached Berlin, the Russians might never have taken the city. Interesting bit of history, isn't it?''

''The hell it is,'' Cep swore. ''I don't care about ancient history. I'm in the news business, remember?''

''Today's news, tomorrow's history, Cep. Lots of times the two tie together.''

''There's no talking to you.'' Ceperley lifted a photostated clipping from the top of the paper stacked on his desk and started to pass it across to Mike. ''Anyway, I also found the significance of April 27, 1945.''

Hawk beat him to his big revelation. ''I know already. The partisans freed the city from the Germans.''

''Then why . . .''

"What about Tirelli? Was he at work on the day Gristle died?"

Cep said, "Yes," belligerently. "And he couldn't have been home when the shooting took place. That bit of information cost me money too. It better help."

Hawk shrugged. "Not really. It just proves he lied. But I can understand why. If any of the killers saw somebody watching from his upstairs window, he wanted them to think it was him."

"That doesn't make sense," Cep argued. "You trying to tell me somebody prefers to let a bunch of assassins know he was the one who witnessed their latest execution?"

"It makes sense to a guy who has spent decades protecting somebody else." Mike had his hand on the door. Another thought had oozed up from the depths of his thought patterns. "Good God! Maybe there is a connection . . ." Hawk's mind was wandering a new trail. "That's it," he said. "They tried to execute Magdalena Tirelli April 27, 1945, because she saw what sank there in the lagoon. This week they killed Gristle because he discovered the same thing."

"What thing?" Ceperley pleaded. Hawk irritated him because his mind didn't appear to reach conclusions from solid linear logic. It never occurred to Cep that his own reasoning was anything other than cool, well-founded, and flawless.

"Huh?" Hawk had been lost in his own creative processes. "What thing? How the hell should I know? I was just a child in 1945."

Ceperley let his head sink into his hands. He was cursing himself for bringing his ex-employee into the case.

"Oh, and Cep," Mike said seriously as he started through the door, "don't mention anything I've told you to a soul. It could get you killed."

"Told me!" Cep shrieked. "You haven't told me a damned thing. You never did tell me anything; that's why I fired you." He rose and stalked around the desk, looking as if he were finally about to cry for the first time in his adult life. "I'll probably get killed," he yelled loud enough to disturb the two writers working outside his office. "And I won't even know what you were talking about. And where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I thought I'd rent a burial plot, the way this story is shaping up," Mike grinned.

"Rent a . . . ?"

"Sure. Jesus Christ used his only three days. If I get killed, I should be out of the crypt in a week. A pure, simple soul like me. Right, Cep?"

"Sure," his former boss agreed. "Hell won't have you. You'd be barbecuing steaks on the coals and borrowing the A-1 sauce from the devil; you're such a pushy bastard."

Hawk patted the other man's cheek. "Love you too, boss. Whenever you sign a check, you look good to me for two, three seconds at a time. *Arrivederci*, sweetheart."

Outside in the gray light of a threatening, cloudy morning he walked to the San Barnada Canal where his boat lay tied up along the trash-littered walk. He passed crumbling, still beautiful buildings with their balconies railed in iron scrolls and their windows arched by long-dead masters.

Inside the cabin windows of his own launch he could see the air tank and the black wet suit of the scuba gear he had rented. The merchant who had supplied him waited patiently. He leaned on the stacks of Coca Cola crates being unloaded from the stubby work boats. The ugly, utilitarian craft far outnumbered the picturesque gondolas with their tall decorated prows and raised finlike sterns.

Hawk paid the merchant what he asked—more than the gear was worth new—but he had made a Venetian happy. He had played sucker for the descendants of the once all-powerful merchant princes.

Regina Tirelli waited for him in the front seat of the launch. She wore white, as if it were summer: white shirt with loose-fitting cowl neck and snowy white slacks. The cranberry-colored blazer and cap looked warm, and a transparent raincoat lay next to her on the seat.

Hawk was dressed for the weather and the job ahead. He wore warm slacks, a wool shirt under a cable-knit sweater, and a sport cap. Under the pants was a swimsuit. The new raincoat hung over his arm.

Beyond a doubt he was the only one in Venice going into the water today, and he knew he was being a damned fool taking the girl along. The Dardick pistol was in the raincoat pocket, but it would be of little value once he had stripped and climbed into the wet suit.

Foolhardy as his plans might be, he couldn't resist. The girl had been persuasive the night before at the party. She had

kissed him when he had finally agreed to take her along. He had not told her where they were going.

Since when do I gamble my life for a kiss? he had asked himself later. Too often, he answered himself as he untied the launch and stepped in.

The American girl rose on her knees to kiss him on the cheek. "I'm so excited," she said. "I've never really done anything; do you know what I mean?"

"No," he admitted.

The throaty rumble of the engine forced her to speak louder. "Anything real," she said, "like work. You're working, aren't you? For money."

"Yeah. Is there another reason?"

"I never have." The boat backed into the narrow channel, circled around the Rezzonico Palace and into the Grand Canal. "Work, I mean. I couldn't. Who would hire anybody accompanied by two bodyguards everywhere she went?"

"Bodyguards?"

She laughed and pointed at a smaller boat trying to keep pace with them through the tangle of bright-colored gondolas, launches, speedboats, and freight-carrying craft that served a city with virtually no streets. The Grand Canal was like a string of color-daubed Venetian beads, the string broken and the beads tumbling together down a woman's bosom.

Hawk gunned the engine, sounded his horn. His bow scraped off an old barge and sent other craft heading for the walls of the channels as he sped down lesser canals and up stretches scarcely wide enough to serve as sewers.

The girl's protest was unimportant to him. He slowed when the bodyguards' boat was no longer in sight.

She was angry. "What was all that about?" she asked. "Are you crazy? We could have crashed and drowned."

He laughed. "In a Venetian canal? We could have walked to shore on the pollution."

"But why . . . are you kidnapping me? If you are, you're making a mistake. Those two men will shoot. First chance they get. They'll kill you if they think you're trying to harm me. That's what they're hired for."

"Shit!" Hawk said aloud. He did have a way of attracting trouble. "No bodyguards. No tails," he told her. "You said you wouldn't tell anyone."

"But they work for me."

"No guards or I go alone."

She sat back, looking more chastened than defiant. When she finally spoke again, she seemed determined to enjoy what was for her no more than an adventuresome outing.

She was pointing to a graceful enclosed bridge suspended a story or more above them. "Look! How beautiful! Only in Venice would such a baroque design seem so right for a bridge."

"Beautiful, all right," Hawk agreed cynically. "It's the Bridge of Sighs, built late in the fourteenth century, I think. It connects the Ducal Palace with the prisons. It was the last moment the prisoners could see the lagoon when they passed in front of those windows. They sighed because few ever returned alive."

"That's grotesque," she said. "Did you have to spoil it? I'm infatuated with Venice."

"And Count La Scala?" he asked.

She laughed and tugged at his coat sleeve. "Jealousy already? We just met . . . but I like it." She slid closer to him. "And of course I'm infatuated with the count. Who isn't? But the trip wasn't my idea. To Venice, I mean. He was in Chicago. He's always traveling. Wherever he goes, he's welcomed by society's *crème de la crème*. And in the streets too, for that matter. He has charisma. No, more than that. There's almost a hypnotic way about him. I was surprised you weren't more impressed."

"He's male," Hawk said by way of explanation. But he knew what she was talking about. There was something about the man that was—well, unique, Hawk thought grudgingly.

"Well, anyway, he kept inviting me to spend a month with him in Venice. It sounded exciting. And my friends insisted. A good catch, they said. As if I needed any more money. The title would sound nice, though. Titles still warrant a few privileges: important things like a place at the captain's table." She smiled wryly.

"Then what are you doing with me?" he asked. He steered out of the Grand Canal and in behind a loaded bus churning up waves. He was aiming for the edge of the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

She sat back, studying him. "You know," she told him, "the modest bit doesn't become you. The count has charisma;

you . . . you know damned well what you've got. You've never had trouble getting a woman.''

''Is that an offer?''

''No,'' she laughed. She was pulling on her raincoat against the icy wind sweeping off the Adriatic. ''I don't exactly have to hire gigolos myself.''

An understatement, Mike thought. He was studying his map, heading toward the Lido.

''Where are we going?'' Regina asked. ''To my cousin's?''

''Later maybe,'' he said. Then he probed. ''But why do you call it your cousin's? Doesn't your aunt still own the place?''

''Aunt?'' Her smooth forehead creased. ''Giovanni's mother?''

''Yes.''

''She's dead. She has been for years.''

''Oh.'' He tried to take the lie in stride. ''Then he lives there alone.''

''He never married. He raised himself since he was a child.''

''In that big house?''

''He only uses the ground floor. He says the other floors are haunted. By Germans. Nazi SS men lived there, you know. During World War II, I guess. I never learned much history. With my instructors you didn't have to if you had pretty legs. Anyway, he says sometimes he hears them upstairs at night. 'Heil Hitler,' they shout. 'Heil Hitler.' Loud and insane like a throng of people. More than could ever fit in a house. Thousands of them, all shouting 'Heil Hitler' over and over again. He says they must have been insane. So he never goes up there.''

''Not even the night I dropped in?''

She was puzzled. ''No. Why do you ask that?''

''I thought I saw a light in a third-story window.''

''Oh, that,'' she laughed. ''He lights that from below. Sort of a beacon so he can find his way back when he returns from work after dark.''

''He turned it off before I reached the house,'' Mike told her.

''No. Well, yes, perhaps he did. I don't know. When the dog started barking, he went for his gun. He had it in his pocket all the time you were there. You can't be too careful

when you're isolated like that. Especially in Italy. It's almost as dangerous to walk down dark alleys in Venice as it is in the States. Not quite, but almost."

They had entered the channels through the flats, and her cousin's house was clearly in view.

"What does all that have to do with finding your friend's killer?" she asked. "Are you saying Giovanni was involved?"

"Hell, no. Just small talk."

He eased off on the throttle. Studying the map carefully and triangulating between the three houses and the other landmarks in view, he moved the launch closer and closer to the spot he figured the hole in Gristle's map indicated. When he was satisfied, he nudged the boat's bow in against the shore and showed the girl how to operate the controls if necessary.

"Now what?" she asked.

"I'm going down," he said.

"Down? In that awful water? What on earth for?"

He opened the cabin and went in. "If I knew," he said as he stripped, "I probably wouldn't have to go down."

"Scuba gear?" she teased. "In this shallow muck?"

He pointed to the entrenching shovel he had ordered along with the wet suit. "I'll be able to work an hour before I have to come up for a fresh tank. If anybody suspicious comes along, just start the motor. I'll hear it. And there's a gun in my coat if you need that. It doesn't look like much, but just point and keep pulling the trigger. The safety's off."

"Gun?"

He squirmed into the black suit, put on the flippers, hoisted the tank onto his back. He fit a weight around his waist and put the mask over the upper part of his face. Then he picked up the shovel and a powerful flashlight before he awkwardly made his way to the stern of the launch. When he was about to drop over the side, he heard her call out in surprise.

"Michael, look. There's my cousin's house. It's so close . . . Michael?"

It was the last he heard except for the bubbles gurgling from his regulator as he breathed through the mouthpiece.

The brackish water engulfed him.

He went scuba diving frequently but never in water like this. It was cold as it first touched his skin beneath the wet

suit, but even as his body temperature raised it to a comfortable level, it felt slimy and thick against his flesh.

He went down less than ten feet, but he needed the light to see more than a few inches into the turbid waters.

He felt eerie again, an unwelcome guest probing into the muck of mankind, probing the mire as he had on so many of his stories.

He wished he was on the surface, scrubbed clean and well dressed. He'd take the girl in the launch to dinner in an expensive restaurant where the tablecloths were spotless and the waiters carried virgin white towels ironed and folded neatly over their forearms.

Then his light caught the first impression in the mud. It was littered with trash and crawling things that fed like starving refugees on the garbage that lay on the bottom.

The tides and wakes of passing boats had rounded the edges of the imprint, but it was definitely that of a skin diver's flipper.

He saw another, and then another. With his face practically in the mud he could trace the last diver's progress into the middle of the channel. He could even see where the boy had stood. Evidence of digging was visible too, and he poked his shovel into the first spot he found. Quickly he learned which of the holes the previous explorer had given up on. He moved on until the underwater trail ended.

Here the hole was several feet deep, nearly six feet in diameter. Although recently formed, the excavation was already filling with the constantly shifting silt.

He had it.

His heart thudded with excitement.

He checked his watch. He had used up more time than he had realized. Already forty-five minutes had passed since he had left the boat. It seemed like half that time, but he couldn't go up. He might spend another half hour finding the spot again.

He had fifteen minutes more air, he calculated. Plus he had the fifteen minutes reserve most divers kept in their tanks as a safety margin.

To hell with the margin, he decided. He couldn't be more than fifteen feet down. He could make that in seconds if he jettisoned his weight and swam hard for the surface.

Determined, he stepped into the hole and jammed his

shovel into the silt. As he lifted it, half of the shovel's contents floated away in the water. He had to work faster, yet control his breathing. A novice could use air twice as fast as an experienced diver. Anxiety burned oxygen like an eight-cylinder gas hog with a faulty smog-control device.

He worked steadily, using every scoopful to widen the hole at the bottom, while going for depth at the same time.

Finally he felt the shovel strike something brittle. It felt as though it broke and cracked under the blade.

It felt like glass. An old bottle probably.

But a sixth sense rejected the original conclusion. That strange, unexplainable sensation returned, stronger and more threatening than before. It was like the time he had entered the snake palace years before in Malaysia. It was at dusk and the temple was lit only by a candle and the faint glow of incense-burning ceremonial bowls set around the cavernous room. He could see the snakes. They were green, deadly poisonous things lying inert on the floor. Others were beginning to squirm on tables and shifting positions on chair legs where they had been wrapped by attendants. The poisonous reptiles could be handled when numbed by the heavy incense. But the tiny black pyramids in the ceremonial bowls were burning their last for the day. Some had already gone out. He had only minutes to accomplish what he had come for and escape before the snakes became active.

He hadn't made it. He had been trapped inside with the lethal creatures.

He had shot and beat his way through to the door, the snakes striking at his legs, untangling themselves from the tables and lunging after him as if they held him responsible for their imprisonment.

He had escaped, but he had left another man to die. The victim had deserved his fate; but later, when Hawk saw the horror permanently imprinted on the dead face, he felt a pang of pity. The man would carry the horror of his last minutes with him through eternity.

Hawk felt like that now.

He didn't know why. It wasn't panic, and it was more than excitement. There was no explaining the sensations that chilled the water, starting at his ankles and seeping upward along his legs, freezing his groin and tightening the muscles across his abdomen, then rising to his chest and finally to his neck.

He had a sense of being in the midst of some ill-defined evil. Suddenly the filthy water was Hades and Hawk's shovel was crushing skulls of the dead as they fought their way across the river Styx.

Mentally Hawk shook himself. What was there about this place that produced these aberrations? Nothing had happened. His shovel had smashed an old wine bottle. That's all.

Was it intuitive good sense that told him to back off? Or was it that which drove him on?

He dug furiously, first with the shovel, then with his hands when that proved faster.

Then, in the beam of his light, he saw what appeared to be metal. It was so coated with mud and darkened with age that it was hard to identify what extended above the glass which he had broken. It seemed to be corrugated.

His mind was playing tricks. The brain was trying to save itself by discouraging that part of him which urged him on. He could not think where he had seen anything like the material before. It could be junk, just part of the accumulation that Venetians had been dumping into their lagoons for generations.

But it wasn't. The corrugated sheet was exactly like the piece of metal they had found in Gristle Grissen's hand when they pulled his body from the mud. Whatever it was that stretched in either direction from Michael Hawk, it was the same thing that the flabby welfare cheat had discovered. This was what had cost his life.

That thought brought another flash across Hawk's mind. Perhaps the killers were back. Maybe they were waiting above to kill him as they had Grissen. To kill Regina Tirelli too.

For her sake alone he ought to give up. But he drove the shovel against the glass one more time. Then he flashed the light on the rectangular opening.

He couldn't believe what he had discovered.

It didn't make sense.

10

He checked his air supply again. Good God! He was already into his reserve. He had to work fast while not consuming an inordinate amount of air.

Moving the beam of his flashlight around, he mentally measured the dimensions of the rectangular hole he had cleared. One thing was certain: he would never squeeze through the hole with the air tank on his back.

First he unfastened the weight belt. He would have no difficulty holding himself down once he was inside. The tank was next. He unfastened the latch across his chest and shrugged out of the strap that ran over his shoulders.

Keeping the air supply mouthpiece between his teeth, he twisted about in the water to put his feet through the hole. Immediately he lost one flipper. He kicked off the other in disgust. He would not be swimming any great distance inside.

His powerful, slender body slipped through easily until his shoulders reached the rim. There he stuck. He squirmed and tried to use the diagonal of the rectangular window for the maximum clearance. Still metal and glass around the frame ripped and tore at his wet suit. His arms were above his head, one holding the torch. Only his teeth biting on the mouthpiece kept him from losing his air supply.

Finally he admitted he was too broad for the opening.

The top of the rubber suit, at least, had to go.

Bracing his hands around the outer frame surrounding the window and exerting maximum strength, he tore himself out again. Sharp edges cut through the rubbery material and put the first slash on his body. Teeth clenched, he ignored the pain and drew himself out until only his legs remained inside.

Awkwardly he took off the tattered top of the suit and cast it aside. Forced to remove the breathing apparatus from between his lips temporarily, he caught himself gasping harder and faster when he could taste the vital air supply again. Panic tried to set in, but he could not afford it. Fear required more air than he had to spare.

Controlling himself, he breathed slower and took time to sweep the flashlight beam along his left side where he could see a foot-long gash in his skin exposed to the pollution of the lagoon.

A wiser man might have given up. There was less than ten minutes left in his reserve air supply. The water was frigid. Blood poured from the wound, and he was wrapped in the blinding gauze of the murky water.

He raised his arms and wiggled through the broken window again. This time glass or metal cut him on both sides. The pain was excruciating.

Suddenly he was inside the strange cave.

The air tank came in easily, and he refitted it to his shoulders.

When he had worked himself into a standing position, his feet were in silt and his head touched a corrugated metal ceiling, forcing him into an awkward stooped position.

Before he switched on the torch, he paused to control his breathing. His ears pounded. He imagined he heard the cadence of marching feet. His mind was reacting to stimulation from the wartime souvenirs he had seen in the old woman's room. He understood what was happening to him, yet the pulsations of the goose-stepping boots battered his brain.

Hawk held the supernatural in low regard, but his experiences were more akin to brainwashing than anything mystic. The air from the tank was no doubt partially to blame, and he was close to hyperventilating due to the moments of panic he had been forced to fight off when he was caught in the window entrance. So he wasn't surprised when the acrid scent

of gunpowder and burning flesh assaulted his nose, although nothing could reach his nostrils because of the water-tight face mask.

He could control fear regardless of how eerie the situation became. His prime worry was hallucinations. It was only a matter of minutes before his brain failed physically. Then no amount of willpower or self-control would compensate for the distortions caused by the souring air and the strange, overwhelming stimuli to which his mind was being subjected.

He had only the vaguest idea about what type of water-filled cavern he had entered.

Where was he? A sewer? A wrecked ship?

A crypt?

The last possibility gripped him. Although he knew it didn't make sense, he could not fight off the feeling that he stood in some form of watery grave.

Again only his curiosity compelled him to switch on the flashlight.

He was shaking.

From the cold, he told himself. But that was a lie. For once Michael Hawk wasn't certain he wanted to know the answers to questions streaking back and forth through his head.

He was in the bowels of a watery hell. Only a lifetime of forced machismo made him swing the light.

The beam was pointed at the ceiling. The corrugated metal was caved downward in places but cross braces held most of the roof in position. There were coated wires, some sagging and others still straight and running along the ceiling and the sides of the section of tunnel he could see. Moving the light, he saw more windows, most with the glass cracked and blacked out from the silt packed in close on the exterior.

Swinging the beam toward his feet, he gulped in air as the light focused.

"Jesus!" he whispered mentally.

The clawed arms of a crab were staring up at him, its feelers and bubble eyes poking out from the gaping mouth of a skull.

The eyes and nose of the head were gone too. Bits of gray goo that might once have been flesh stuck to the top of the darkened bone.

Time or a sharp impact had severed the skull from the remainder of the skeleton, and Hawk swung the light until he

discovered the torso. The chest was folded over what had once been a wheel. The arm bones had broken off at the shoulder and were protruding from the dirt-covered flooring. The legs were still attached to the torso and remained in the sitting position. The safety belt had broken or rotted through the years.

Shreds of material that might have been clothes hung from parts of the skeleton. The feet were still inside things that once had been boots.

Hawk moved the beam forward of the grisly sight. He found what he had come to expect, the array of instruments and the second seat that signified the cockpit of an aircraft.

The windshield was intact although it was badly cracked and covered over with silt on the outside. The copilot's place was empty.

Mike moved a few steps back and felt his feet breaking something brittle. He lowered the light.

He was standing on the ribcage of another corpse. His feet had caved in the bones.

Quickly he swam farther back in the wreckage of the plane, swishing his bare feet about instinctively to wash away the contamination of the dead.

It took effort to maintain control; he concentrated on trying to identify the aircraft. His first thought, based on the construction, was that he stood inside an ancient Ford Tri-Motor, the "Tin Goose" that the famed car maker had produced in the mid-1920's. Acres and acres of corrugated Al-clad, like finely grooved tin roofing, concealed the mechanical bird's skeleton to justify her nickname.

He ruled that out quickly. He doubted if any Ford Tri-Motors had ever reached Venice let alone crashed there without being recovered.

It had to be an Italian SM-79 bomber or a German JU-52 from World War II. Both were trimotors, but his memory for nostalgic trivia failed him. He could not recall which had the corrugated siding like the Ford.

So this is what Gristle Grissen had found, he mused, a crashed relic from World War II.

He remembered a similar find—an American bomber that had been lost in the North African desert for years—had proved a great human-interest story when it was finally dis-

covered. A TV play had been based on the finding, and the story had made page one around the world.

But this was different. No one had been murdered for stumbling upon the old American bomber in the desert. War relics were uncovered regularly. No one died as a result.

Gristle Grissen, though, was dead. So were two Italians.

Why?

He lowered the flashlight again and checked the corpse on the floor. A round hole had been poked through the bone just above the eye cavities. Rolling the head to the side with his bare toe, he confirmed his suspicion. An exit hole, much larger than the one in front, proved the man, probably the copilot, had been shot.

Sweeping the sides of the fuselage with the light, he found other holes. With all of these, many of a size suggesting shell shrapnel and bullets in the .50-caliber antiaircraft range, the metal skin of the plane had been punctured inward. They had been fired at the plane by an external enemy.

He came across only one exception, a hole closer to the size of that in the front of the skull. In that one case the corrugated metal had been punctured outward.

His conclusion was logical. The man on the floor appeared to have been shot from inside the transport.

To convince himself, he swam forward again until he was in the cockpit. He scooped his hand down around the pilot's hip, felt what might be the remnants of a holster, and then began digging in the silt with his fingers.

He accepted that rotted flesh and bones were mixed with the mud, but he dug until his fingers folded around a short metal tube.

He lifted the rusted thing into the light.

A German Luger.

He struggled against the rust until he had the clip out. He shoved out cartridges until he was certain. One had been fired.

The pilot had apparently killed the man in the second seat.

Again, why?

That was one thing Gristle might have discovered if he had completed his search. A murder committed decades before.

But who gave a damn about one more death in war? Enlisted men shot unpopular officers. In Vietnam the gory vengeance had taken on a more sophisticated touch. Men

from the lower ranks tossed grenades into the tents or bunkers of their superiors. They gave the practice a euphemism to ease their consciences. "Fragging," they called it.

Pure and simple murder. But fragging sounded better.

The reverse occurred too. Officers threatened or actually shot subordinates who turned coward or refused to attack.

Few were ever tried for murder. Usually punishment for such crimes was meted out unofficially in kind. A bullet for a bullet. A grenade for a grenade. The primitive justice of war exacted by the dead man's friends. So how could the pilot's crime concern anyone now?

No doubt the plane had crashed on the flats years before, trying to make an emergency landing on what looked like the open ground an aircraft needed to come down out of the air in one piece. The pilot must have died in the crash, and the plane must have continued across the mud into the channel, sinking below the surface before anyone noticed or could effect a rescue.

Otherwise the bodies would have been removed. Human beings had a thing about uprooting the dead from perfectly good graves and moving them to cemeteries where they stayed just as dead.

The silt from the rivers flowing into the lagoon would have concealed the aircraft rapidly, especially with the murky water to blanket the wreckage during the process.

None of his speculation answered his real question. Where was the connection to Gristle?

Slowly he swung about again and swam for the tail section of the craft.

He passed an open door clogged with dirt.

An open door?

That stopped him. Had someone escaped after the crash? More than one person?

The condition of the plane indicated that was altogether possible. He detected no signs of fire. Only the front of the ship was extensively damaged.

And the fuselage was empty.

Had it been filled? With what?

Both were unanswerable questions. It could have been loaded with German gold or some other form of loot. If so, when had the valuables been removed? There was nothing he could see in the sweeping cone of his flashlight that showed

the fuselage had been entered since the crash. If the treasure had been carted away years before, who would care if Gristle Grissen found an empty transport?

Unless it had carried some form of contraband, anyone reaching the wreckage immediately after the crash would have taken out the bodies before the cargo. It was a human trait he assumed applied to Nazis and Italians as well as anyone else.

Going deeper into the tail, he entered an area where threads suggested the rearmost section had been curtained off. There was a seat in position there too with the remains of an unfastened safety belt. It was another strange circumstance. The pilot up front, the copilot dead in a stretch of fuselage that could have held several dozen men or tons of cargo, and then this. The seat meant a third person might have been aboard.

Momentarily he was distracted. He had spotted figures imprinted on the wall of the aircraft.

Numbers.

He let himself rise into a horizonal position, then carefully wiped the figures with his hand, working slowly so as not to stir up the water in front of his face mask.

The numbers were etched into the metal so those that he could not make out visually he traced with his fingers.

He knew precisely what the figure was. A fuselage number. The engines on a plane might be changed, even the wings, and practically every moving part, but an aircraft retained her identity through life in most cases by the fuselage number given to her at the factory.

He committed the number to memory.

At least he could now identify her if he needed.

But his attention was drawn from the numbers, and he allowed himself another few seconds of investigation.

With the craft's nose pointed slightly downward, the tail section was elevated. Little silt had collected and he found himself staring through the water at a point where the light illuminated what was left of a well-constructed box.

No, he decided. Not a box. The sides curved inward at the bottom. There were small rocker appendages on the bottom, and the boards were fitted together like a piece of furniture. The surface of the wood had been stained and finished, he thought as he rolled it over in his hands.

Yet it was no bigger than an old-fashioned bread box.

Suddenly none of that mattered.

He breathed normally and felt himself sucking on a vacuum.

His air tank was empty.

He had only a minute or two to reach the surface. He had to squeeze back through the window.

First he had to find it.

His lungs began to pain him immediately.

He did not expect to make it.

And he was hearing that thump in his ears again, the sound of marching feet.

11

Lodged sideways in the window, his feet and legs outside, he was caught with his arms over his head, the glass and sharp metal slashing downward from his armpits. He could move neither forward nor back. His lungs demanded relief. They would accept water, even the grim residue of the lagoon; but they had to have something to fill the vacuum formed inside the air sacks.

The aircraft had won. The mausoleum had claimed another corpse. His head and upper torso were trapped inside for eternity.

His mind began to wander. A portrait of Lisa, his dead wife, filled his vision. Slowly he began to surrender to death. He could accept the inevitable, regretting only that it came before he had satisfied his curiosity.

Then, almost too suddenly, he was yanked back to reality. Hands were touching his legs, pulling at his ankles, his thighs. The pain under his arms was unbearable; he wanted to scream, to open his mouth.

He felt movement.

He hadn't imagined the tugging on his legs. Someone or something was drawing him outward. Hope soared. He welcomed the pain of the cuts lengthening along his ribs.

Finally he was free; he was outside the aircraft; his feet were in mud. He thrust upward with his leg muscles and stroked with his arms. Popping to the surface, his mouth opening, he sucked fresh air into his bursting lungs.

The girl's head bobbed up beside him, the blond hair straight, wet, and streaked around her face. She too gasped for air, then brushed the hair aside.

"You?" he coughed.

"Me!"

She stroked off for the launch, still rammed bow-first into the bank of the channel. It was farther away than he expected; he was too exhausted to keep up with her.

He was startled to see her lithe, young body clad only in bra and panties. With both garments wet and transparent, she might as well have been naked as she hauled herself out of the water and into the boat.

Ignoring modesty, she extended a hand and hauled him in.

Hawk gaped at the contours of her firm, ripe body and said, "You saved my goddamned life!"

"You didn't come up," she said while she scrubbed herself vigorously with the towels Hawk had brought with him from his hotel. Her body was covered with goose bumps, and she slipped into the white slacks and shirt even though she soaked the expensive outfit across the bust and back. She tossed the towel to Mike before going forward and backing the craft away from the shoreline.

While he dried himself as best he could, she headed the launch toward her cousin's house. He dressed and handed the towel to her again so she could swipe away the water that trickled from her wet hair. A minute later she nosed the boat in close to the dock.

She jumped out immediately, gathering the towel and jacket into a roll clutched to her chest. Without waiting for him, she started for the house.

Still in the boat he looked up at the third-story window.

The figure was there again. The old woman was watching.

An agonized scream pierced the quiet of the morning. The figure above moved.

"Regina!" Hawk shouted.

But it was too late. Muscles long unused pulled the teetering figure into the window. The old woman swayed, righted herself, and then pitched forward. Glass and wood fragmented.

The scream rose in pitch and intensity, like the voices of Dante's condemned descending into the inferno.

Regina Tirelli looked up in time to see the old woman seemingly suspended in air, facedown, arms partially outstretched, an ancient, wounded bird plummeting to earth.

She landed with a dull, smacking sound on the stones and blossoms of a wilting garden, her siren shriek snuffed out.

But the sound went on. Hands to her face, Regina was screaming, near hysteria. Mike ran to her side, wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and hurried her to the door of the house.

"Oh, my God, what was it?" Regina was sobbing. "Who was it? I don't understand."

"Get inside," he told her. "Hurry."

"But who was it? My God! It was a woman, wasn't it? But who?" She was shuddering uncontrollably.

"Inside," he insisted. "Lie down on the couch by the fire."

The door handle refused to budge. There was no time to waste with locks. He had to get back to the old woman on the remote chance she was still alive. Raising his foot, he kicked. The aged wood splintered and the door swung open. The girl went in with him.

Back at the old woman's side, he knelt in the mud, his fingers testing for a pulse before he rolled her over gently and pressed his ear to her breast to listen for a heartbeat. There was none. There was no warm air on his cheek, either, when he put it close to her nose and mouth.

She was dead.

But death was merciful. Somehow, ironically, with the mud disguising her hideous scars, she was less ugly now than she had been in life.

How, why had she fallen? What if she had been pushed? That would mean someone was in the house with Regina. Taking the pistol in one hand, Hawk awkwardly lifted the frail husk and carried it through the front door. The body could not be left where it lay. He too was governed by the codes ruling how mankind dealt with its flesh after life had left it.

Regina gasped at what he carried into the living room. "Is she dead?" she cried, turning her face away.

"Yes." His voice was flat.

"In there." Regina pointed down a short hall and Hawk followed it until he came to what must be Giovanni Tirelli's bedroom. It was simply furnished, neat and clean. Hawk laid the old woman down gently in the center of the bed. His impulse was to wipe the grime from the battered face, but some kinder instinct decreed that its veil should not be lifted.

Regina's eyes were transfixed on the gun in Hawk's hand.

"Stay here," he ordered as he went to the stairs and bolted up to the second floor.

The mental thing was with him again. This time the pounding in his ears was different. Now it was masses of voices chanting, shouting, screaming approval and adulation. His imagination was a separate entity, playing games with him; the roaring in his ears could deafen him to some warning sound. Usually concentration was instinctive for him; now he forced it as he kicked open door after door. He held the gun ahead of him, swinging, ready to fire.

Nothing.

He raced up the second flight of stairs.

Again nothing, except now the cold wind off the lagoon ruffled the curtains at the broken window.

The limp, dusty panels reached out like scrawny arms, beckoning, luring him to take the same plunge into the flattened flowers below.

There was no sign that anyone had been in the room with the woman when she rose from her wheelchair, screaming, and fell forward through the glass.

What had made her do it, he wondered. And at the exact moment Regina was starting toward the house. It couldn't have been coincidence. She had occupied the chair and the room safely for years.

Why now? Because she had seen Regina?

But she would have seen Regina before, on other visits.

What was different this time?

Maybe what she saw dredged up some vision, a memory so terrible or traumatic that it galvanized her muscles into one burst of movement.

Impossible? No, for all he knew, she could have retained some use of her muscles throughout the years. Maybe they had never completely atrophied. The same held true of her throat. There was no reason to assume she had been so badly

wounded that she couldn't utter one shrill cry if jolted by some electrifying mental shock.

But what was the catalyst? It could not have been he. He was still in the boat, out of sight behind brush and small trees.

It was something about Regina. What she wore?

When she came to the house before, at least the one time he had seen her here, she wore black.

Today she wore white. The uniform of a nurse? Possible.

But why?

He thrust the unanswerable aside for now. He had to go to Regina. There was still a chance that an assailant hid on the first floor of the house.

He went down quickly, relieved as his hearing returned to normal.

Regina was sitting at the hearth, her back to the fire, arms banded around her knees, pulling her body into the smallest possible ball. Shivering and sobbing quietly, she was as vulnerable as an abandoned kitten.

He checked the kitchen, bath, and dining room. The door to the cellar was latched from the outside so he discarded that as a possible hiding place. Except for him and the girl—and the body in the bedroom—the house was empty. Moving from window to window, he peered out, trying to guess where someone might have disappeared just ahead of them, but he saw nothing. The windows and rear door were latched. He had to accept that the old woman had fallen on her own. No one could have been inside with her at the time, as nearly as he could tell.

Starting back through the kitchen, he saw the telephone.

He knew Regina needed him; however, the number he had memorized from the submerged fuselage of the aircraft was jackhammering his brain. He knew it would take hours, perhaps days, before he had an answer to the ideas that sprang from the simple arrangement of digits.

He took down the receiver and placed the call. He demanded and finally got an English-speaking operator and asked her to put through a call to the States.

She would call him back, she said. Soon.

"Hurry," he told her. "It's urgent. Tell anyone you reach at that number in the States that I have to talk to a Mr. George Pollock just as fast as possible no matter where he is,

no matter what he's doing. You can't overemphasize the urgency.''

He hung up, put the gun back in its holder, and returned to the living room.

Regina had regained control. She was still shivering in her wet clothing. She raised her reddened eyes slowly.

''Who was it?'' she asked softly.

He sat down beside her and tried to make his voice gentle.

''You had an aunt named Magdalena Tirelli, right?'' he asked.

She was surprised. ''Yes. Giovanni's mother.''

''I think it was she who fell.''

''But that's impossible. She has been dead for years. She was killed by the . . .''

''. . . partisans on April 27, 1945,'' he deliberately finished the sentence for her to gain credence for his point.

''Yes. I think that was about the time. In the forties anyway.''

He checked his watch. ''It'll be hours before Giovanni returns from his job. I don't think we dare call him away from his work. It would attract too much attention to him. We can't chance that now.''

She cried, ''I don't understand any of this! Giovanni lives here alone. His mother's dead. I was told that. Often.''

''I don't understand much of it myself,'' he said. ''And I'm only guessing. I think your aunt survived the shooting and Giovanni stayed here, nursing her, caring for her as best he could without any kind of medical help, without anyone ever seeing her, for fear the partisans would come back to finish what they had started. Only he can tell us.''

''But what happened today?''

''She was in a wheelchair by the window. She stood, toppled forward, and fell through the glass. I don't suppose it took much of a fall to kill such an old woman.''

''Oh, my God, you'll have to call the police. You'll . . .''

''No,'' Hawk said quietly. He thought of all the secrets he had to hide, his past involvements with violent death around the world and the vast wealth he controlled. None of the fortune was his legally; it was money he couldn't let go back to the Communist killers who would claim it if he were exposed.

Regina stood up. "Then I will. There'll be an investigation, a burial . . ."

His fingers closed loosely on her wrist.

"No," he said again. "I don't think you understand, Regina. We're probably already marked for death. You, me, Giovanni. We know too much."

"But we know nothing."

"We know enough," he said. "Or they think we do."

"Who?"

He shook his head. "I wish I could tell you."

12

George Pollock sat in his window at the Hotel de la Poste at 5 rue des Oliviers. He held his binoculars to his eyes, pressing the front lens against the window glass. The thirty-year-old man with a boyish face watched the minor KGB official leave the hotel and walk toward the beach.

He's on vacation, George concluded sadly.

After months of suspension and another month doing nothing at his CIA office in Washington, the American with the mannerisms of a 1920's ''sport'' had welcomed the return to the field. For a week he had diligently tracked the ineffectual Russian spy from the States to the south of France and then the last twenty kilometers by train from Nice.

He had stayed with his prey all the way to the moderately priced hotel and checked in right behind him. The KGB man had reservations for a week, and now he carried his towel rolled under his arm.

Besides, what else could a spy do in Monaco, the fairyland principality where a little girl from Philadelphia could marry an honest-to-God prince and live happily ever after? All she had to be was beautiful and rich and talented enough to rise to stardom as an actress.

A closely packed maze of skyscrapers and rococo build-

ings, the entire country on the north coast of the Mediterranean, counted for nothing militarily or politically. It was just a place for sheiks, celebrities, and the otherwise rich to lose their easily acquired money at the casino. It also served as a tax haven for many questionable business propositions from other parts of the world.

There were no military operations to spy upon and no technical-industrial complex to be destroyed in case of the final conflagration. Certainly Monaco sheltered no shipping of any consequence to be watched, not unless you counted some of the magnificent ocean-going yachts that lay at anchor or at piers behind the man-made seawall.

The Russian could be here for only one purpose; a proletarian vacation.

George Pollock once again had been handed a meaningless, dub assignment.

He had been shunted out of the way rather than fired because, as one officious superior had said, "Pollock had none of the "paucity of language" that kept other discharged, disgruntled employees from writing successful exposés about the agency. In other words they feared that Pollock, with his academic verbosity, would write the truth about the ineffectual American espionage ring that couldn't keep track of military movements ninety miles off the nation's shore in Cuba, let alone tell when the hell the Russian leaders would eventually punch the big button that could spell *fine* for most of the northern hemisphere.

When the phone rang, Pollock rolled across the bed, careful to avoid wrinkling his new taupe-colored herringbone jacket and white knit vest. The pistol in his belt holster gouged. He let the phone ring again while he adjusted the damn thing.

Snatching up the French-style ivory phone, he panted "Yes" into a mouthpiece shaped like an old phonograph speaker. He tried to disguise his voice, to make it casual. He wanted to hide the hope that he was about to be sent into a situation more urgent than watching a pudgy Russian bathe his pale, block-shaped body on a cold Mediterranean beach.

"Georgy Girl?"

George Pollock didn't have to recognize the voice.

Only one person in the entire world called him Georgy Girl. One person with so much illegal "inherited" wealth that

he was a virtual national treasury all to himself. It was the same man who a few old-style, covert action experts still in the CIA used for those nasty, frequently deadly and always flagrantly expensive operations that had last been permitted under the disgraced Richard Nixon. And Pollock was their unwilling liaison with an equally unwilling Hawk.

"Oh, no!" Pollock groaned. Usually the sound of that voice calling from anywhere in the world meant George Pollock was about to come closer to death than a hundred-and-twenty-year-old man caught in bed with a nurse coveted sexually by his surgeon, chemotherapist, and anesthesiologist.

George's relationship with Michael Hawk was anything but salubrious for him; however, a perverse fate threw them together all too often.

The voice, though, was one more reason Pollock kept his post at the CIA. He was the one person in the world who knew enough about Michael Hawk's financial assets to coax the ex-journalist into using some of that wealth for unauthorized CIA projects. Also, Hawk let him live despite this knowledge. For that generosity Hawk extracted favors without regard to their complexities.

Theirs was a strange confederation. That was about their only point of agreement.

"Georgy Girl, I need a little information," the voice continued cheerfully. In spite of the light tone Pollock could detect an urgency in the straight-on request.

"I'm working," the slender agent objected.

"Won't take any time at all," Hawk soothed. He never comprehended prior commitments. "Get a pen and paper. Take this down."

"Wait," Pollock said impatiently, although he had already placed a sheet of notepaper and a fine-point pen next to the phone for just such unexpected calls. Remembering all he had learned in training, he had torn the paper from the pad so he would leave no readable impressions—in case anybody ever gave him any top-secret messages. Nobody ever did.

He intended to keep Hawk waiting an exasperatingly long time, but his occasional partner-in-trouble just went right on without delay. His life had depended several times on the novice espionage agent's skill and luck, and he was still

among the living. Therefore Hawk took George's aplomb at face value.

Hawk read off a number at his machine gun verbal rate and in a soft whisper that suggested he was not alone. Then he went directly into his demands.

"That's the fuselage number of a World War II transport aircraft, circa 1930 to 1940, I'd say, but chances are she was still flying as late as April of 1945."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," George protested. "What in the name of satan are you talking about?"

"Chances are she was German," Mike continued. "I'd stake the dollar you keep in the mothballs that she was a JU-52 transport."

Pollock fumed. "World War II? JU-52's? Hawk, have you finally blown your ratshit-sized brain? I'm working to make the world safe from World War III and you're . . ."

"Owlshit! Just make some phone calls and trace that aircraft to its last destination. The Germans were fanatics about keeping records. Give it a top priority and get back to me inside twenty-four hours." Quickly he listed the places he could be reached: at his hotel, the Giovanni Tirelli house, Ceperley's news bureau office, or Count La Scala's palace. All the time Pollock was taking notes and trying to explain why he couldn't give priority to any such nonsense.

Hawk finalized it simply.

"When you track where that aircraft was on its last flight, tell those underhanded friends of yours at the company, and they'll have you shagging your bony ass down here to take your old buddy out to dinner, I promise you."

Hawk was lying and Pollock knew it. The ex-newsman made wild predictions when he was working on a shoestring lead.

"Aw, no," Pollock was saying into a dead telephone. "Not again. Every time I see you, people with guns begin to see me in the shape of a bull's-eye. Hawk? Hawk? You there? Hawk, damn you!"

Pollock flung the phone at the cradle. He never swore except when he talked to Michael Hawk. But then no one else ever got him into, or out of, such deadly scrapes.

He rolled across the bed again, punched the pistol into his side one more time, and looked out the window. His quarry

was disappearing around a corner, the wrong corner; he wasn't heading for the beach after all.

"Damn!" George jumped up, realizing he was losing the man he had been assigned to tail.

He was at the door when he stopped.

The KGB man would have broken into a run the moment he rounded the corner. He was long gone. Pollock had lost his man again.

He was in trouble again.

Then he looked at the number he had written on the small piece of paper. Was it important?

Michael Hawk was crazy. He was conniving, reckless, a powder keg rolling through a brush fire. But he was rarely wrong in his estimate of priorities. Even when he hadn't the faintest idea what he was searching for, his uncanny hunches were seldom wasted on trivia. George put little credence in that extrasensory nonsense and he would never have admitted his thoughts to anyone, but sometimes he wondered privately whether Hawk was just incredibly lucky or smart or whether he might have indeed been blessed with some inexplicable occult perception. Of one thing Pollock was certain: the man was an enigma.

The antique aircraft represented by the fuselage number on the sheet of notepaper had significance.

And George knew how he could put a battery of file clerks and a chattering army of computers to work tracing the plane's history through the West German archives. A couple of phone calls was all it would take.

But should he gamble his reputation again, or should he go after the KGB man while there was still hope?

Then he realized the point that had gone unmentioned on the phone.

Somehow Hawk had tracked George to Monaco. Supposedly Pollock was there incognito, top secret, undercover, hush-hush all the way. But Michael Hawk could call CIA headquarters, throw around a lot of excited, fast-bursting verbiage, and enough bullshit to find the college-educated espionage needle in a worldwide haystack.

Somebody in Washington, probably his nonconformist leftovers from more adventuresome days, wanted him to cooperate with the high-riding Hawk.

Darn, Pollock mumbled.

No, not darn, he corrected himself. Damn. Goddamn. Goddamnit it to hell.

Nursing his gun-bruised side, he walked around the bed to the telephone. He would call Bonn to get Hawk's trace started, he decided. Then he'd get back to finding his KGB man again before the sneaky bastard was halfway around the world.

But God, Pollock thought, he hoped he didn't have to work with Hawk again.

Seeing the man in Venice was a game of Russian roulette with all the cylinders full.

A misfire was his only hope.

13

A man in the old Frati Sf .260 three-seater set down at the Venice airport, taxied to the assigned space, and switched off the rebuilt 260 hp Lycoming engine. He tucked the submachine gun into the storage compartment back of the seats, locked the aircraft, and crossed to the first telephone booth he could find.

He waited patiently until his call went through several persons; when he heard nothing at all, he knew he had reached the employer he had never met.

He spoke in his native German. "The subject went diving as expected," he reported. "The girl remained in the boat alone for more than an hour. Apparently fearful that the subject had exhausted his air supply, she undressed and went in after him. They both emerged seconds later, the man without any of the diving gear. They proceeded to the house nearest the site in question. And I am certain they did not notice me observing them. People rarely look up any more. However, I might have attracted some attention from the traffic-control monitors at the airport."

The young German waited for orders.

When there were none, he hung up and walked through the airport gates and took a cab the short distance to the launches

carrying passengers into the city. From the launch he transferred to the less expensive *vaporetto* which would take him down the Grand Canal to within walking distance of his low-cost hotel. He had been well paid for the few hours he spent flying the rented aircraft for his unknown superior, but he had no intention of wasting his money. He needed all the cash he could get in order to buy an airline ticket to Colombia. There he would once again take up his more profitable employment as chief pilot for the unheralded narcotics airlines that supplied the addicts of southern California.

As he sat on the slow-moving water-bus, he hardly noticed the man who moved next to him on the board seat. The nondescript man slid closer to accommodate the young mother with the three small children. The flier's mind was on the money, calculating to the last lira how much he would have left once he bought his ticket to Colombia.

He hardly felt the pinprick in his arm, but he turned to face the apologetic, fair-skinned man next to him.

The man excused himself in the flier's native language. He didn't consider that unusual until the pains started in his arms and raced to his heart.

The pilot cried out. He almost stood, but apparently no one understood German except his seatmate, and he left at the next stop.

The pilot did not pitch forward onto the deck for several minutes. When he did, the other passengers walked around him. No one bothered to point out the body cluttering the rear deck until the *vaporetto* made its second stop past the Rialto bridge.

Then there was considerable loud, impatient discussion at the delay caused by the inconsiderate corpse. The bus had to wait until the body was lifted off and laid along the stone walkway. There several police officers considered him matter-of-factly until an ambulance boat came to take him to the morgue.

14

Michael Hawk came out of the bath with a towel wrapped around his firm, flat middle. His clothes, rinsed if not clean, hung near the living room fireplace beside the girl's. She stood at the hearth, wearing her cousin's robe and working at her hair with a brush. She stopped when he came closer.

She dropped her hands to her sides as if she anticipated his actions even before he did.

"You saved my life," he said again.

He meant to kiss her softly, appreciatively, on the lips, but when they touched, the warmth between them became a spark. In the beginning his hands rested lightly on her upper arms, and she was tense under his touch. She was a girl who normally didn't take sex or romance lightly. The first indication that the show of gratitude was becoming something more presented itself when she lifted her small body toward him, standing tiptoe.

One of his hands left the arm and circled her waist. Her own fingers touched his bare flesh lightly on his shoulders. The sensation was more than pleasant.

They had shared harrowing moments, he thought. That was all. Moments in the water when he had accepted his own death because he had twisted in the broken window of the

aircraft. He had stupidly wedged himself parallel to the top and bottom of the frame rather than taking advantage of the slight extra space allowed him when he had used the diagonal. A stupid reason to die.

The painful gashes in his side served as a reminder as she touched the strips of adhesive tape he had applied in the bathroom. It was going to hurt like hell when the tape came off, but he had found a bottle that he thought was an antiseptic. He hoped he had cleaned the wounds quickly enough to avoid infection from the corroded metal and the foul water.

They had also shared the grotesque sight of the old woman plunging from the window. The emotional impact would be greater on Regina than on himself. He had looked up in time to see the woman tottering behind the panes. The girl had been taken completely by surprise. And it was her aunt, although she had never known the woman, never guessed she was alive.

Now, as they stood in the isolated house, they felt instant closeness created by the intensity of the past few hours.

He wasn't surprised when she began to relax, to accept his support. He needed her too. He was tough. Scars left from his wife's death and the loss of friends protected him. For years he had been a follower of trouble. These past months he had lived as a fugitive from the avarice, sadism, and madness which tracked a man with wealth that could be easily stolen. He was tough, but he knew he now stood in the eye of a hurricane. Soon the storm would move and he would be engulfed in its havoc.

He doubted that he would escape Venice before he killed or was killed himself.

For these moments he needed Regina Tirelli almost as much as he had needed her ten feet down in the murky waters of the lagoon.

"I . . ." she started to say. "Not like this."

Her voice was lost in the gentle, exploratory pressure of his lips on hers. Their bodies were coming together in slow motion, each draining the other, yet replacing more than they took. The warmth created by their nearness was an aphrodisiac to their oneness.

The danger they both had come to recognize was an ingredient, as was the one gun they had had between them.

"Regina, I don't want . . ."

Hell, he thought. He was about to express a bit of noble trash about morality when he was not certain they would even get outside the house alive.

Of course he wanted her. She might be the last woman he ever had. The last human who ever cared for him. He might be the same for her.

He kissed her on the soft curve of her neck. The front of her robe fell open and his hand slid beneath, creating a wide V where he could see her full, high breasts.

Somewhere in the fog of mutual need, the towel fell loose from his waist. Soon the robe covered it.

The fire in the hearth died down to embers, but their naked bodies, locked in love's communion, felt no chill.

When they slipped to the couch, he didn't know. In unspoken agreement their bodies shifted until he was above her, his leg thrusting hers apart.

They spoke to each other then, but the conjugal banter had been printed in a million books, heard in the dialogue of a hundred films. Meaningless in themselves, the words were a part of the rite, a delicious delay, a heightened anticipation.

Finally they strained together in silence as he entered her, partially withdrew, and plunged deeper again and again. He thought she was screaming or crying; he no longer had sensation except in the small area of his groin.

And when their bodies had finally erupted together, they entered the total mental void where passion engulfs being like crashing surf foams over the sand.

Later he rolled off her to a sitting position beside her outstretched body. He stroked a hand over her breasts, across her abdomen. She stirred appreciatively and smiled.

"That came as a surprise," he said softly.

"No more for you than for me."

She sat up, suddenly serious. "You wore nothing," she said.

"Wore?"

"You know what I mean."

He knew, and his mind flashed back to his nights in bed with his wife. They had wanted no children, not immediately anyway. Later, he always told Lisa, when he was more successful or when he settled down in a place where they would have a home. Always later, until there was no tomorrow. She died before they had even tried to have children.

"Nor did I." Regina sat up on the couch, reaching for the robe to cover herself. "And I'm not on the pill."

"Oh!" It was all he could think to say.

Then she smiled. "Oh, I'm being foolish. The doctor would know."

"Doctor?"

"Attila's doctor." She pulled on the robe and got up to put more wood on the fire. "I got sick when I first came to Venice. He's been seeing me every day since. I keep saying I'm well, but Attila insists I must until the doctor releases me."

"You mean the doctor will know whether you'll get pregnant or not?" Mike asked. He disliked the conversation. It effectively switched off the glow of passion; the romantic in him preferred to let it linger and diminish slowly.

She faced away, embarrassed. "My temperature, silly. He'll know when I'm ovulating. He was doing some tests because he thought that was what caused the pains. Oh, please, let's not talk about it. I'm sorry I brought it up." She returned to the couch and sat beside him, turning her face into his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I don't usually get so carried away, but when I thought you were drowning today, probably already dead, and I went down in that water, again and again, not finding you, I . . . I guess I was just so grateful when I did reach you . . . and then the shock of that woman . . . my aunt . . ."

He kissed her. "There's no need to explain. Besides, who knows, you and I . . ."

She put her fingers on his lips.

"What you're going to say . . . it could be true. I think it is, but even if this is all we ever have together, it was wonderful. I loved you. I may again." She picked up the towel from the floor and tossed it into his lap. "You won't believe me, I'm sure, but I am old-fashioned. I'm blushing."

"Magnificently blushing," he agreed, smiling at her in her loose-hanging robe. "All over." She giggled and clutched the robe closer.

Holding the towel around his waist, he walked to the hearth where his clothes were hanging. They were almost dry. The hours had sped by. Giovanni would be arriving home from work soon.

"How long have you been staying with Attila?" he asked.

"Nearly two months." She too had begun to dress. They did it with their backs to each other as if they hadn't just joined as one. "I've been studying art here in Venice. Most of the time he's been gone."

"He travels a lot?" The question was an idle one.

"Yes. Everywhere." She began to name places around the world. Cuba, Panama, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Zaire, Cambodia, Iran, Libya, Ireland. The list was seemingly endless. "He goes places where there are problems or where he thinks there will be trouble. He arranges to help the refugees for the U.N., I think. He has no other work. His business managers handle everything for him. He is a true humanitarian."

She paused. "I feel guilty," she added. "Isn't that silly? I mean, I'm in his house as his guest and he's never touched me, although I've seen the desire in his eyes. Then you come along, and in twenty-four hours I'm making love to you, with my aunt lying dead in the next room." She paused again and Mike let her get it out in her own time. "He's going to ask me to marry him. I might have said 'yes,' but what do I say now?"

He turned her about and raised her chin with his fingers. "Nothing yet, until we know," he said, not sure what he would have answered had she asked what he meant. "Right now I think we have more immediate problems."

She looked at him quizzically.

"Staying alive," he told her.

"What did you find down there?" Her voice was sharp with alarm. "What were you caught in?"

"I'm not sure myself. I'm having it checked. But you don't want to know."

He left her and went to the window. The early evening of winter was approaching fast. He thought he knew what had to be done.

"Look," he apologized. "I shouldn't have brought you into this. There might be someone waiting outside for us. Someone dangerous. But I think I know what has to be done. We'll have to bury your aunt here, on this island. Secretly."

She inhaled sharply. "In unhallowed ground? Without a priest?"

"Giovanni will know," he said. "But I could be digging until he gets here. I could have the grave ready."

"Oh, my God."

He steadied her. "Can you stay in here alone? You'll have to tell your cousin. My Italian isn't much, and the way these Venetians talk, I'd never get the message across tactfully enough. Can you do that?"

She tossed back her hair. "Yes."

"Good."

He kissed her before he went to the door leading into the cellar.

It was no more than a crawl space. Even in that shallow space water oozed up through the stone and concrete floor, but he found a shovel and went out into the trees and brush at the rear of the house where the land rose higher above the lagoon. He dug a shallow grave and brought what stones he could find to lie at the foot of the rectangular hole. The stones would hold down the remains of the body so the ground water would not bring it to the surface some ghastly night during high tide.

Darkness covered him when he returned to the house. He found Giovanni sitting on the couch, his head down in his hands. His cousin was comforting him.

The Italian looked up when Hawk entered.

"I told him," Regina said. "He'd never admit it, but I think he's glad it's over. For her as well as himself."

"Does he agree we should bury her here?"

"Yes. I don't know why, but he agrees with you. We'll help."

"No." Mike's response was direct. A man shouldn't have to help bury his own mother without so much as a coffin.

With the two cousins sitting together at the fireplace, talking softly, Hawk wrapped the frail corpse in a blanket and carried her to the place he had dug. He lowered her gently, then covered her body with rocks before shoveling in the dirt. When he finished, he called to Regina and Giovanni. They came to stand over the grave, crossing themselves silently. Mike left them to pray while he went into the house to clean up.

When they returned, he directed his question at Regina.

"Does he know which partisans shot her years ago?" he asked.

She queried her cousin at length. When she spoke again, what she said didn't surprise him.

"No. He was just a boy, but he was with the guerrillas in

the city when they drove out the Germans. He came home to find her lying in her own blood; the Germans who lived in the house were gone.''

Hawk knew the rest. The boy had found a doctor, later telling their few friends that she had died. He had nursed her alone ever since, assuming she had been shot for consorting with the Germans.

''He must have a gun,'' Mike said. ''Tell him to get it. He'd better go into town and stay with you at Count La Scala's.''

She translated the message. Giovanni made no objection. He went into his room where his dead mother had lain minutes before and returned with a vintage German Luger PO 8.

''I'll ride with him,'' Regina suggested.

Hawk said, ''No, my boat is faster and safer, in case there's anybody out there waiting for us.''

Hawk switched off the lights in the room, leaving only the flames in the fireplace for illumination. With darkness, fear seemed to have laid an icy hand on the house and its occupants. Hawk looked at Regina and her cousin. In the leaping fire-light their faces revealed only visceral reaction: terror, the need to escape.

The American took his ugly weapon from its holster and stood with it in one hand, the other on the knob of the front door.

''Tell your cousin to go on out to his boat. I'll cover him, just in case.''

Hawk opened the door and stepped outside, eyes straining in the dark. Giovanni hurried past him. The dark blob in his hand would be the German pistol.

He stomped out to the short pier and jumped into the boat, freeing the line as he touched the starter button.

A sun, twenty feet across, erupted where the pier had been.

Arms, legs, a head scattered and disappeared into the black. The explosion hit Michael Hawk like cupped hands, caving his eardrums. The yellow ball of fire blinded him temporarily.

He didn't see the second explosion as his own launch disintegrated into sticks and pieces of metal. He felt the heat from the bomb and exploding fuel on his face.

Regina screamed, rushing to the door. ''Giovanni! Giovanni!''

Hawk leaped for her, catching her around the waist and knocking her down.

"Dear God. Help us," she was crying.

The flames from the channel brightened the windows at the front of the house to the clarity of midday.

"He's dead," Mike yelled at the girl. "We have to get the hell out of here."

"What was it? What's going to happen to us?"

Ignoring the questions, Mike grabbed her arm and pulled her to the kitchen and through the rear door.

He knew there might be killers waiting in ambush, but he had to gamble.

Not once had he foreseen a bomb placed on either his or Giovanni's boat. He could only hope that the assassins were content with their one method of disposal.

With Regina fearfully trying to hang back, he dragged her into the dark through the trees until they came to the channel.

There was no choice. They had to wade into the muddy water and swim across the deeper part. An expert swimmer normally, the girl floundered with the added weight of her wet clothing, but he helped her on.

Off the island they plowed across mud flats that sucked their shoes from their feet. They moved into shallow canals, slogging onward as their strength waned.

At last they reached a house where he found a small outboard tied up to a dock. No key was needed to start it, and it answered quickly to his tugs on the rope. Finally they were moving toward the city, looking back at the dying flames of the explosion.

A fire boat was on its way from the city. Soon the police would be involved.

"He's dead because of me, isn't he?" Regina said, choking back tears.

"I think the bombs were meant for us," Hawk said. It was the only solace he could give her.

"But why?"

He shook his head. "For something that happened three decades ago."

He said it, but he could not have explained why Giovanni Tirelli was dead. He'd have to know the reason soon, Mike told himself. You couldn't defend yourself against a ghost or against an enemy you didn't even know.

15

Michael Hawk delivered the girl to the palace on the Grand Canal.

She ran up the curving staircase to her room as the count came partway down. La Scala tried to speak to her, but she rushed past him, dripping water and blood and whimpering incoherently.

Attila made no gesture to stop her. Instead he glowered at the American.

"Our boat sank," Hawk lied. "We had to walk across mud, swim partway."

The count's cool blues eyes narrowed, an ineffable accusation. He knew Hawk was lying. "I heard sirens," he said. "I was on my way from St. Mark's when I saw an explosion in the direction of the Lido."

Mike gave up the lie. "Someone killed her cousin," he admitted.

The count uttered an oath in Italian. "She is only now recovering from an illness. The shock, the investigation could be too much for her."

"You can shield her," Mike said. "Keep the police away."

"Yes."

"And keep her safe."

The count worked his lips in a way that suggested bewilderment. "Have you involved Regina in a dangerous matter, Mr. Hawk?"

"Possibly."

"Then I want you out of the city in the morning," he said menacingly.

Mike spread his hands. "*Io ho cento lire*. How far can I get on that?"

The count was not to be put off. "My travel agent will charge your ticket to my account. Barbaro's near the Sansovino Library. By tomorrow."

"She'll be in danger, Attila."

"*Sta tranquillo*. I'll take her away. But you be gone first."

"That sounds like a threat."

"I do not mean to threaten, Michael. I have no idea what you have involved Regina in, and I do not care to know. I only care for her safety. For her sake, leave Venice."

Mike made no reply.

He considered the Italian for a time before retracing muddy bare footprints across the terrazzo floor and out into the garden. Then he returned to the canal and took his stolen boat close to the hotel.

It was nearly midnight, yet the streets were alive with people. They paid little attention to the bedraggled figure that left the outboard untied to float away with the changing tides and took a back entrance to his hotel.

In his room he showered, tossed his dirty clothes from the window into the canal, and redressed before packing. With no particular plan except to leave as poor a trail as he could, he checked out and rode a water-bus close to Ceperley's office.

Entering, he saw his former boss asleep at the desk in his glass enclosure.

An unexpected touch on Mike's arm sent his hand darting toward his gun, but the grip hardened and the voice that spoke to him in a whisper was familiar.

"Leave the suitcase here, Mike," George Pollock said from a point next to the entrance. The young CIA man relaxed his grip. "We can talk better outside."

"How the hell . . ." Mike started.

"Outside," Pollock urged.

Together they left the building and walked into the street.

They strolled in silence toward the Contarini del Bovolo

Palace, one of the hundreds that dotted the islands of the Rivo Alto. It was not a destination, but the route offered them the protection of people hunching against strengthening winds off the sea.

"The pilot bringing us in tonight says there'll be a gale by tomorrow noon," Pollock said idly, as if his sudden appearance in Venice were no surprise at all.

"Do they expect flooding?" Hawk asked.

The casual conversation served only one purpose, to give each of them a chance to look for someone tailing them closely enough to overhear. Pollock finally began to explain when he was satisfied he could speak freely.

He got directly to the point. "That plane you asked about," he said. "It was a German JU-52 according to the fuselage number, just like you expected."

"You found out quickly enough."

"Anything for a friend," the CIA man responded.

"Bull," Hawk told him. "You didn't fly here to tell me what you could have said on the telephone."

Pollock asked, "What do you know about that particular plane?"

"Damn little. And I don't intend to tell you even that until you explain what's so important about it that your superiors let you come rushing down here from wherever you were."

"Monaco," Pollock told him. "You called the agency headquarters in Washington and asked to be put in touch with me, right?"

Mike said, "Yeah. I said it was urgent."

"And I mentioned to some contacts that I was interested in an old Junker transport. As soon as I gave the fuselage number, it was like saying 'Open Sesame' to the German national archives."

Pollock stopped. He leaned against a wall, his hand tucked in under his coat, his eyes searching the people who flowed around them, one foot pulled up to make himself look like a casual Venetian.

In spite of himself he created an impression of the ineffectual Tom from *The Great Gatsby*, but at least he was making certain no one else stayed in the vicinity while he talked.

"It seems a lot of people were interested in Junkers right after World War II. Like Russians, British, the German government in Bonn, our own people."

Mike cocked his head. "This particular Junker?"

Pollock breathed in deeply before he began. "On April 26, 1945, while Adolf Hitler and his entourage were hiding in bunkers beneath the Reich Chancellery garden and while the Russians were closing in on Berlin for the kill, two JU-52's made a rather spectacular landing in the heart of the city . . . on a makeshift runway. They landed on a cleared street under fire and brought in ammunition. It was like a heroin rush to the poor bastards caught in the city. Probably it didn't put off the inevitable more than a couple of hours, just long enough to get a few more women, kids, senior citizens, and diehard troops killed."

"The planes took off again?" Mike asked.

"One did with a load of wounded."

"You trying to say somebody important could have been aboard? Like Hitler, maybe? Or Martin Bormann?"

"No. Not on the first plane. It was finally established that the plane, crew, and passengers were captured almost immediately after landing. Eyewitnesses survived, including one German who lay up in the rubble with a sniper's rifle, scoping in on the face of everybody that went aboard—the wounded and the pilots. If he saw anybody that so much as resembled a high-ranking Nazi, he was going to make certain they didn't get out alive."

"And the second plane?"

"Yours," Pollock said. "That fuselage number was tracked by the war crimes investigators, the Israelis, and a hell of a lot of others with an interest in Hitler's penchant for gas chambers and firing squads."

"And?"

"She was loaded with wounded too."

"Still no chance Hitler was aboard?"

"None. Again there were plenty of witnesses. Nor was the plane loaded with crates that might have carried a horde of Nazi loot out of the country. Besides, when the investigators talked to the witnesses, including Polish slave laborers with no reason to lie, they realized it didn't matter. The plane's wing clipped a building on takeoff and was seen going down in the wreckage of the city. She scattered her wounded along several miles. If they weren't dead when they hit, they died before they were recovered. Except for two who somehow survived for a couple of days. They were out of their heads

with pain; they just remembered falling. The plane couldn't have attained more than a few feet of altitude before she crashed.''

''The Allies found the wreckage?'' Hawk asked.

''The Russians might have, but you're inquiring about a plane that burned years ago, Hawk. In a city that was turned into a trash heap before it finally surrendered.''

Mike puzzled for only a minute. ''There must have been a few loose ends or you wouldn't be here.''

''Not much. The pilot and copilot were never found. It's a detail the West Germans would like cleared up. But more important my people want to know how come someone in Venice is suddenly taking an interest in a plane that crashed in Berlin in 1945.''

''Because she didn't crash in Berlin,'' Hawk answered.

Pollock froze, his startled gaze riveted on Mike.

''She's here in Venice.''

''Here?''

''In one of the channels that bring in seawater. A man died not more than a couple of hours ago because I found the wreckage. Another reporter was killed earlier this week because he discovered the same thing.''

Pollock attempted to scoff. ''You're trying to tell me a bigwig Nazi made it this far on a plane that witnesses say crashed in Berlin. Impossible. There was nobody aboard that plane except the pilot, copilot, and the wounded.''

A hunch had surfaced in the forefront of Hawk's complex mind. ''And a nurse,'' he added confidently.

''A what?''

''A nurse. There was a nurse aboard dressed in white, wasn't there?''

''Man, you've really been researching this thing. How did you know?''

''I guessed.''

''And you think it was Hitler's mistress Eva Braun.'' Pollock attempted to force a laugh. ''That prospect has been well discredited. The nurse was named Frau Schwein. She was in her early fifties. Two of the men who loaded the Junker knew her. She was from Hitler's bunker, but she had worked in regular army hospitals most of the war.''

''Was she carrying a box?'' Mike asked. ''About the size of a bread box, a little larger.''

Pollock pushed himself away from the wall. He began walking again. When they approached a streetlight, he took a folded paper from an inner pocket and briefly exposed it. He scanned it quickly.

He became evasive.

"Hawk, if you're holding back information of national interest . . ."

"I'll tell you what I know. I followed some leads and went skin diving. Inside the plane—it's still fairly well intact—I found two skeletons, one with a bullet hole through the head, the copilot, maybe. And nothing else except the water-logged remains of a box, good wood; you could still see some of the finish. It was like a piece of furniture."

"What does that mean?" Pollock snapped impatiently.

"Beats me."

"And how did you know about the nurse? That little detail was still in the classified sections of the War Crimes file."

"Why?"

The CIA man hesitated, wondering if he should answer. "Because she'd been staying in the bunker with Hitler and Eva Braun, and there was a phony death certificate showing she died a week before she was seen boarding the plane."

"And her body was never found?"

"Right. But who told you about her?"

Mike smiled. "An old Italian lady."

"What did she say?"

Hawk reveled in his own answer. "Nothing. She was crashing through a window at the time she explained it all. She was dead when I reached her. Besides, I don't think she had spoken since the war."

Pollock exploded, "Hawk, you tight-mouth bastard. What are you trying to give me? I trace your damned plane for you, and you try to tell me an old lady who doesn't talk is plunging through a window while she tells you about a nurse. I could probably have you arrested and extradited for withholding information."

"I wouldn't just yet," Mike said calmly. "I think we're both about to be shot."

16

Mike had sensed someone behind them. He spotted one man who dogged their footsteps; and as they veered off another alley, a second figure stood in the streetlight at the end of the block. He had his hand in the pocket under his topcoat. His very stance was menacing.

Retreating to the main street again, they found themselves being funneled into a small open area near the Contarini dal Bovolo Palace. Neither American had spoken, but they had taken up a back-to-back position that provided a modicum of protection. Both knew they could not stay where they were. They had been backed into a trap and any minute the men sent to waylay them would edge in close enough for the kill.

"Damn," Pollock muttered. "How many are there?"

"Enough," Hawk replied.

There seemed to be no escape route. Then Hawk, his eyes carefully moving over the dimly lit scene around him, looked up the curious Lombard spiral staircase adjoining the courtyard of the palace.

It was an ornate stone thing, a beautiful open tower on the outside of an otherwise rather ordinary building. The corkscrew succession of wide steps was held up by a series of

slender white columns. A stone railing built on smaller columns followed the steps up five stories.

The staircase also wound close to the ends of several matching balconies before it ended at a circular platform. A dome with a metallic roof protected the platform.

At first Mike thought the staircase offered the only avenue of escape. Then he saw a movement more than halfway up the stairs. A movement and a reflection. A glint of metal. It could have been a woman using a silver kettle to water the plants set on the steps beneath the railing. At another time of day it could have been a child playing with a toy. But the hour left only one alternative: a man with a gun.

And there was another killer at the top with a rifle.

"Jesus!" Hawk breathed.

He knew now they had been herded into a trap the way jungle hunters beat the brush until a tiger backs into a cage. At any second the first shots might ring out.

Characteristically he did the unexpected, exploiting his opponents' assumption that everyone ran away from danger.

"Take cover!" he shouted at Pollock. At the same instant he shoved his friend with one hand to give him momentum while he plunged directly toward, instead of away from, the gunmen on the staircase.

He heard the rifle crack and the bullet ricocheted off the stone pavement where he had stood. Running for the stairs, he had his gun out, ready to waste a shot that would throw off the man with the rifle. But Pollock had reacted with unusual speed. The unexpected push had not thrown him off. He let himself hit the rocks with his shoulder, rolled, brought his own gun into action and fired the shot Hawk needed. The second flash from the flowers along the railing of the third-floor level streaked over the former newspaperman's head. The rifleman had panicked.

In the same moment Mike reached cover. He was on the bottom steps of the spiral, safe from the man above him. He whirled to protect his quarrelsome partner.

Another figure was in the adjoining courtyard.

Hawk didn't wait to see if the man was armed. He brought up his left arm for balance, cupped his pistol in the crook of his elbow, and aimed instinctively. The man in the courtyard seemed to fly backward out of sight even before the gun bucked in Mike's hand.

Crouching low, Pollock was running for the foot of the stairs when Hawk started up.

A man coming down met him with drawn gun.

Hawk's Dardick barked twice. Blood and tissue spilled from the body. Only the poor light saved the American from a look into exposed innards as the body fell forward with outstretched arms, as if to embrace its executioner.

Mike sidestepped; the gory corpse missed and tumbled into a startled Pollock before crumpling to the stone at the bottom.

"Who are they?" Pollock shouted.

His friend could only answer, "I don't know."

More men jumped out of the courtyard next door and ran across the open space toward them. The Americans fired, missing the moving targets. The new attackers found temporary cover in doorways and behind giant flower-filled urns.

Flashes of gunfire showed their position, but they were too well protected for instinct shooting. The two Americans were forced upward around the circular stairs. At the first door into the building, Hawk tried the knob and threw his weight against the heavy paneling. It didn't give. The doors off the stairs were built to be stubborn.

And he knew what waited on top—the man with a rifle.

Pollock was no help. And neither the columns nor the railing provided sufficient cover. He was being forced upward too, step by stone step, toward the waiting rifleman.

Continuing higher was suicide. Remaining where they were meant waiting until the attackers hit the exposed parts of the Americans' bodies.

Neither idea appealed to Hawk.

Where the circular staircase ran past the end of the second balcony, he made his decision. A chance was better than a certain loss.

"Keep shooting and moving," he called to his partner. "Give me covering fire as best you can."

He holstered his own weapon and climbed to the top of the slanting staircase railing. The end of the balcony was four or more feet away. The distance seemed greater now that he intended to jump across than it had when he looked up from below.

He clutched one pillar and leaned over the empty space. He reached for the bottom of the balcony. Even with his long arms outstretched, his reach was not quite enough, and his

grip on the pillar was sliding. He would soon slip and fall to the pavement.

The men in the courtyard spotted him in the open. They surrendered their own cover to come out firing. Bullets whined like mosquitoes on a Wisconsin summer evening. Hawk nearly lost his grip before he drew himself back for what little cover the pillar offered.

Pollock emptied a clip at the exposed assailants. He shouted to attract their fire to himself while he ran up a few more steps.

"Up here, gentlemen," he taunted.

One of the men in the open screamed as a shot hit him from above. He fell while several of the others retreated, but not before a barrage of bullets chiseled away at the stone near Michael Hawk's head.

Gambling as usual, Hawk bent his knees until they had the thrust of a compressed spring; then he leaped from the tower holding the spiral stairs. For an instant he was as free as a bird, far above the stone-covered courtyard. His fingers were stiff and bent like claws. They struck uprights to the balcony rail and almost opened of their own accord, but he sucked in his breath and let himself fall.

It was a drop of only a few inches, yet he seemed to plunge into an abyss before the claws caught the balcony floor.

His weight threatened to straighten those claws into ineffectual sticks, but he made his entire body rigid until he had his hold. Then he became a pendulum, swinging back and forward between flying pieces of lead.

Finally he made the one big swing, hooked in a toe and pulled himself up until he fell over the railing and into the shadows behind broken flowerpots. Only then did he realize that shots were coming at him from above as well. The rifleman had not held his position. He had climbed to the top floor of the tower, sort of a widow's watch overlooking the city and the lagoon.

Pollock was being forced farther and farther up into the trap.

No use warning him, Mike decided. He needed Pollock as a distraction, something the gunmen could concentrate on as Mike ran to the far side of balcony, climbed out again and onto the tile roof of the adjoining building.

Several tiles broke under his weight. More came loose

from under him and slithered over the edge. His new, slippery-soled shoes were not meant for climbing, but he couldn't stop. The rifleman in the tower had spotted him and was drawing a bead.

On all fours Mike scratched his way over the peak of the roof. He seemed like a man so intent on his own safety he would desert his compatriot.

Behind him Pollock yelled, "Hawk, you bastard, I'm trapped."

There were more shots. The young CIA man was being backed up the circular staircase to the top floor where his head would be blown apart with the high velocity rifle's slug as soon as he emerged above the last step into the widow's watch.

Police whistles and sirens shrieked in the night. Lights were flashing on all through the labyrinth of buildings that surrounded the masterpiece of staircase architecture, but time was running out. The gunmen could back the agent into the trap before the police could reach the scene. Hawk was Pollock's last hope.

With his hand on the roof peak, his body protected from the gunfire, Mike worked himself to the end of the building. Then he dropped to a flat roof. From there he could see the top floor of the tower was like the rest. It did not stand alone. It was pressed against the building so it was not open on all sides.

Jumping to the roof of the building served by the staircase, Mike saw the rifleman back into the darkness.

Reinforced by the adrenalin that heightened his instincts and poured strength into his muscles, he climbed to the roof that covered the dome itself.

Going up the dome was easy. If he fell, he would drop less than seven feet to the building the staircase butted up against, but when he was arched over the top on the exposed side with his belly bent across the pinnacle of the half hemisphere, he looked down story after story. And he could hear the crack of Pollock's pistol a few feet away. In seconds George would have to run up the last steps and burst onto the top landing. His best chance would be to come up shooting, hoping he hit the rifleman before the gunman tore him apart with a single high-powered shell.

There was no staying on the stairs for the government agent.

The men coming up had the advantage. One stayed in the courtyard firing whenever Pollock revealed his position. The others, one or two (Hawk couldn't be certain), had the protection provided by the underside of the steps above them. Pollock's feet were always below his weapon. They could cripple him first and then finish him unless he continued to climb: toward the inevitable.

Now, Hawk told himself. Now, or his obstreperous buddy was a dead man.

Shifting his position until his legs were splayed beneath him, he let himself slide downward slowly.

The tension prolonged itself while thoughts tumbled and condensed to fit the seconds as he slipped down the metal sheeting.

There had to be an eaves trough around the domed roof, he told himself, or any kind of barrier that would catch his feet and keep him from sliding completely off the sheeting.

If there were no eaves, there had to be something men stood on through the centuries as they repaired the dome.

But who said the Venetians ever repaired anything? Except for the tourist attractions, half the charming city was crumbling into dust.

Did you have to scream when you plunged four or five stories to your death, he wondered. Was that an inbred human reflex?

Then the edges of his shoes struck a rim and he made his sweating palms into suction cups.

His downward slide ended. He stopped, spread-eagled on the exposed side of the tower dome.

He couldn't stay there. The men in the courtyard would see him and pick him off with a few carefully aimed shots. He couldn't hang on long with his feet barely holding him on a rim that was less than the thickness of his leather soles. His best bet was to twist—with infinite care—to his left with his hand extended, reaching for the rim. Even breathing pushed him farther from the roof, and as he continued the maneuver he was forced to bend his knees. The human body was built that way.

Bend his knees, though, and he would certainly dislodge his footing.

It was gamble time again.

He deliberately let his feet slip from the eaves trough, slid

the rest of the way on his stomach, and caught the lip of the roof with his fingers long enough to swing his dangling legs between the pillars below.

Like an ape he came flying into the widow's watch feet-first. He didn't see, but he felt his heels smash against a human chest. The rifle rattled on the concrete floor.

He tangled with the body he could hardly see. Neither could reach their guns, and Mike tried to find the other man's throat. His opponent was smarter. He backed off, dropped to his hands and knees, and charged, throwing his shoulder into the American's midsection.

The blocker's impact thrust Hawk against the rail. He sagged there with both hands clutching the pillar on either side to keep from falling.

The old railing cracked ominously and began to crumble. Mike could only curse his luck. After his humanfly act he was going to die because the damned Italians had not reinforced the masonry in a hundred years.

His grip was loosening too.

He almost wished he were about to be shot instead. It would be more merciful that those few seconds of plunging through nothingness.

Finally a gun spat flame into the void of blackness, but the awaited sting of metal on flesh didn't come.

The shoulder went limp against Mike's midsection instead, and he became aware that Pollock was on the top floor too. The rifleman slumped while George drew his associate back onto solid footing.

With no appreciation, no understanding that he and Mike had just swapped turns saving each other's life, the CIA man swore, "You damned fool, why weren't you helping me?"

Hawk had no inclination to explain.

The entire battle picture had changed.

Police were charging into the courtyard. The killers were returning the officers' fire before being cut down or darting off down an alley into the labyrinth that was Venice.

"This way," Hawk yelled.

Pushing Pollock out of his path, he found the door off the staircase that led into the building. It was open. Obviously the rifleman had his escape planned. It was a plan he no longer needed.

The two Americans dashed into the old, musty interior.

They stumbled down a dark hall to the faint illumination of a window, smashed the glass, and climbed onto a roof.

They ran without direction, jumping from one rooftop to another without destination, not really caring as long as they were putting distance between themselves and the police.

Eventually the roofs ended, and Mike squinted into the blackness between parallel rows of buildings. The distance across the gap was too far to leap.

And below? Stone alley or canal?

It had to be a canal, Mike told himself.

"Jump!" he yelled to his friend.

Pollock balked.

Mike pushed. The CIA man went off the roof with his feet trying to walk on air.

Wisdom briefly stayed the ex-newsman's descent.

Wait for the splash, he told himself. Or the splat.

Why not? It was too late to stop Pollock in any case.

Relieved when he heard the distinct sound of water, he jumped feet-first, hands clutching his groin. Halfway down he wondered if the narrow canal were deep enough to break his fall or shallow enough to break his legs.

When he entered the water, he knifed through it as though he were never going to stop. His feet did hit bottom, but not before water closed in over his head. A jolting sting shot through his feet, and he flailed to the surface. He gasped, first in relief, then in shock as Pollock's fist exploded in his face.

"You sonofa . . ."

That was all Mike heard before he slid under again.

Next came a tearing pain in his scalp. Pollock was dragging him from the canal by the hair, inflicting maximum revenge.

There was no space between the water and the building walls, no way out except the footbridge where the agent was jerking Mike upward. Once out, they broke into a run and then hid in a doorway where they stood dripping and swiping the filthy water from their lips.

Not far off they could hear the police. Sirens, whistles, shouting. But no more shooting.

They had made good their escape.

"I ought to kill you, Hawk," Pollock sputtered.

With pretended innocence Mike asked, "Why?" His tone was a hurt protest.

"You didn't know if that was an alley or a canal when you pushed me. You know damned well, you didn't."

Hawk spread his hands. "Well, I didn't think of it being an alley before I pushed."

"The hell you didn't."

"What's the difference? We couldn't have stayed where we were, the police on our tail. One of us had to find out."

"Why not you?"

"Me?" Mike was incredulous. "Me go first? Jumping off the roof into a canal was my idea. My idea, you go first. Your idea, you go first. Fair enough? Besides, you owed me one. I saved your life on that spiral staircase."

"Playing human fly?"

"Yeah. What if you had reached the top of the steps before I came swinging in there. Your head would have been opened like a cantaloupe, your seed-sized brain exposed to the fresh air for a change."

"Bullshit! I could have taken care of myself."

"Yeah? Then why were you crying for my help all the way up that tower?"

"Who was crying? Hey, wait. Where are you going?"

Hawk had left the hiding place and stepped into the narrow, twisting alley. He was stalking off toward Ceperley's news room, he hoped. In Venice you rarely knew where you were going. The city planners had never heard of a straight street or a ninety-degree corner.

"To change clothes," Mike said. "Maybe you always stink like this, but I don't."

"You're walking away?" Pollock challenged him. "Leaving those bodies back there with the police?"

"Let the Italians clean up the garbage. Me, I got a problem to solve. Like who was on that Junker transport that was worth killing for, all these years later?"

"Maybe that was all of them," Pollock said hopefully as he caught up. "I mean those guys who were shooting at us. Maybe that's all there is to it."

"Don't you wish. With our luck they're just the second string. By morning they'll have the stars off the bench and on our tails. Want to quit and run for home?"

"How can I?" George complained. "I don't even know where we are."

"Venice," Mike replied. "Somewhere in the incompara-

bly beautiful city of Venice where tourists are greeted with smiles and outstretched hands. How about a romantic gondola ride down the Grand Canal, our gondolier singing the traditional *barcarola* of love and romance.''

''Hawk, shut up, will you?''

''I can't. If I don't talk, my teeth will chatter; I'm so goddamned cold.''

17

With dawn approaching, a shivering Michael Hawk and his angry friend had found their way out of the city maze. They were heading for Ceperley's news bureau for a change of clothes when Mike recognized the Sansovino Library. He recalled what Count La Scala had told him.

Over the protests of the CIA man, Hawk veered off course, searched the deserted street until he found the Barbaro's Travel Agency that served La Scala's compulsion for travel, and debated whether his latest hunch warranted another brush with the local legal system.

He considered the lock as he made up his mind. It appeared to exceed his expertise in burglary.

"Open it," he told Pollock.

"Break in?" Pollock looked at the colorful brochures and posters in the agency window. The place hardly seemed a target for a robbery. "Why?"

"I got a question nagging me. Go ahead."

George resisted. "You do it. Me, I'm headed where it's warm."

"I can't," Mike admitted. "And relax, we're not going to steal anything more than a file."

"Jesus Christ!" Pollock mumbled. He glanced in either

direction and pressed close to the lock as if he intended to peek through the keyhole. A moment later he swung the door open.

"Stand watch," Mike told him.

Hawk let his eyes adjust to the deeper darkness inside before he moved to the three file cabinets he found behind the counter where customers were greeted. Passing up the one locked cabinet, he drew out of the top drawer of the next metal repository. Its folders bulged with more brochures. That was not what he wanted.

The second was more to his liking. There the file folders were labeled with names and places in alphabetical order. The bottom drawers were the ones he wanted. They were filled with the records of the company's regular accounts.

One bulged thicker than all the rest. He did not have to read the name.

"La Scala, Count Attila."

He tucked it under his arm, not quite certain what he expected to find, but past experience told him you learned a lot about a jet setter from his itineraries.

He went outside.

"Lock it," Hawk said. "I want the management to think they've just misplaced this."

Pollock did as he was told.

He had to catch up to his long-legged friend who was striding toward the news bureau at a brisk but inconspicuous pace. The agent didn't even get a chance to ask what they had stolen before they were inside Ceperley's office and shaking the older man awake.

"Hawk!" Cep came out of his drowsiness. "I ought to kick your ass up between your ears, get all your brains together that way. Where the devil have you been? I could have used you five hours ago. A bunch of IRA gunmen just shot it out with the police in the courtyard of the Contarini. I had to get my own boys out of bed; just drowsed off again myself."

"Irish Republican Army?" Pollock raised a hand to scratch his head and then remembered it was full of muck from the canal. He had no idea what the IRA was doing in Italy. More specifically why had they tried to kill Hawk and himself.

A glance at Hawk convinced the CIA man that the newsman had no idea how the Irish terrorists had gotten into the act

either. But Mike played it as though he understood everything, that the others were the fools.

"Got another job for you, boss." Hawk put the file folder on top of the messy desk.

Through sleepy eyes Ceperley squinted at the pair.

"Who's he?" He pointed at Pollock. "And what happened to you two? You look more like a sewer rat than ever, Hawk."

"My assistant," Mike introduced Pollock without using a name. "We went for a midnight swim. Very romantic. But go through this file . . ."

Cep picked it up and read the name on top. He said nothing, but his look was tougher than mail.

"Check the places the count has been in the past few years, farther back if you have time."

"You giving me orders again?" Cep snarled.

"Then find out if anything big happened in those spots when La Scala was there. I'm sure the wire services could check it fast if you said you were onto something big."

"Me check it out? You're working for me. How come you keep forgetting that fact?"

"Any place my helper and I can clean up while you're getting the preliminary reports in?" Mike asked pleasantly.

Cep roared, "No. They don't have septic tanks in Venice. That's the only place anybody would let you bums clean up. Aw, shit," he said as he snatched up the file folder and turned to the teletype. "There's a loo down the hall. Take a whore's bath in a sink. That's the best I can offer you."

"That's fine. We'll be going out for breakfast and to pick up some new clothes for my aide here. See you when we get back."

Hawk picked up his suitcase from near the door where he had left it and the two men disappeared into the hall.

The old editor flipped angrily through the file folder.

That damned Hawk, he thought. As innocent as an adder, as trustworthy as a jackal. Yet the flake had a constellation of talents that overshadowed his flippant manner. What in God's name had the irritating, insubordinate bum come up with now?

Angrily Cep checked the papers. He hated doing Hawk's work for him, but too often the wild ideas paid off. Luck, pure, simple luck. And he had to admit, Ceperley mumbled,

the big shit had balls. And smarts. But reliable? On a news beat, never. With a friend, probably. But Cep hoped he himself would never have to rely upon that aspect of the many-faceted Hawk personality.

Almost regretfully he found the dates and the destinations of La Scala's latest trips and fed the information along with his questions into the teletype.

As he waited, he dug deeper into the folder. Soon he was putting more information out on the wire.

Something troubled him. There was an incipient pattern in the trips that nudged his memory, yet he couldn't pin it down.

He tried to stretch his thinking the way a chess player strains to see one more move farther ahead than his opponent. If there was something in those travel dates and destinations that Hawk hadn't noticed, Ceperley would welcome the *coign* of vantage the discovery would offer him. He'd give his left flappy ball to get just one move ahead of his ex-employee. Otherwise the old bureau chief would have to admit to himself that the younger man had finally bested him.

The feedback from the teletype didn't excite him.

Count La Scala apparently had a knack for visiting places while they were still peaceful and serene.

"Still," Cep said aloud.

He too talked to himself. He had picked up the habit from Michael Hawk, and it flourished whenever the big man was near.

"Still peaceful and serene," he said.

He bent over the teletype once more. His two forefingers poked at the keys with the speed of sewing-machine needles.

This time the answer took longer, and the two men were returning before he began to see the pattern. Once you saw the relationships, it was like watching a well-choreographed ballet.

The old man's ego bloated with satisfaction. He had outthought the free-lance reporter again.

Again?

He corrected himself reluctantly.

Finally.

He had to work at shaping a scowl as Hawk returned in a complete new outfit, his wet clothes wrapped in paper towels.

The second man, the one Hawk called his assistant, had changed too. The clothes looked new.

A weary Michael Hawk settled into a chair and studied the cheap newsprint filled with information from the wire services. More was coming out of the machine, but Ceperley held one swatch of paper against his belt.

He was smug as a cat with a tuna fillet.

"You find any connection between the count's trips and the news?" Mike finally had to ask.

"Naw. The count's been following the sun. Whenever he has been in a country or an island, the news has been upbeat or nonexistent."

Hawk sighed. "I thought I had something going," he admitted.

George Pollock shifted in his chair and eyed his cohort critically. The CIA man did not like the idea of having pulled a burglary for nothing.

"You want me to continue searching?" Cep asked.

Hawk drew himself up. "No. I'm out of leads for the moment. I guess I'll get some rest."

He was to the door before Cep said, "Of course, if you were a good newspaperman, you would have known the right question to ask."

Mike pivoted. He waited, letting the man behind the desk relish his triumph.

"You might have asked, 'Did anything unusual happen after Count La Scala took his trips.' "

"Well, did it?"

"Did it what?" Cep dragged out the punishment.

"Did anything happen after La Scala left those places?"

Cep lied, "No, not much. Let's see. There was his Chilean visit some years back. The parliament had just elected Allende, a Communist, as president. Shortly after the count left for home, the military overthrew Allende and murdered him or let him finish himself off. Then came the reign of terror and the military dictatorship. And there was his trip to Ireland before the IRA blew up General Mountbatten. La Scala was in Munich and Lebanon before the PLO killed the Israeli Olympic stars. He took a trip to Iran and the shah was ousted by the Ayatollah Khomeini."

Eyes red from lack of sleep, Hawk jumped to the teletype. The information was spewing forth in capsule form.

"Guyana . . . ten days before the Mad Messiah held communion with cyanide instead of wine," he read. "Rhodesia

just ahead of the bloodbath. Cambodia when the mass starvation was beginning. Los Angeles, a month before Manson.''

The list continued in no particular order, a litany of horror.

Then Pollock and Ceperley were both at his side watching the connection that distant researchers were making by comparing the dates of the trips and disasters reported in the papers a week to a month afterward.

''Coincidence?'' Pollock asked.

''Yeah,'' Hawk sneered. ''Like it's a coincidence that it's close to dawn when most people wake up.''

''You aren't thinking one man caused all that hell, are you?'' Cep asked. ''No one human being could create that much agony.''

''I don't know,'' Hawk said as he tore off the sheet and folded it to fit in his pocket. ''I think we're delving into a dimension none of us can understand.''

''A dimension?'' Cep's cynical mind rejected his own discovery. ''No individual could have paid for a fraction of those terrorist attacks, revolutions, coups, and attempts at genocide. And figure the count's age. That file from the travel agent goes back to when he was taking his first Grand Tour without his nanny.'' The editor tore off another strip of paper and shoved it in front of Mike's eyes. ''Look, the same pattern existed when he was a twenty-one-year-old orphan. No kid could have influenced history.''

''Maybe it just proves the world is always in chaos,'' Pollock suggested.

The poetry of violence had its own tempo, its own meter, Mike thought privately. It was the background music to daily life.

''Or maybe it shows there are forces, ways of influencing people, events, that we can't comprehend yet,'' he said softly.

Cep tried to scoff. ''What's this? Mysticism from the world's second greatest skeptic? After myself, of course.''

Michael Hawk responded thoughtfully, ''I don't know, b you can cut off the research. I'm going to find a hotel and sleep on it.''

''What about the file?'' Cep asked.

''Send it to Barbaro's Travel Agency with a typed note. Sign it, 'Regards, Lucifer.' ''

18

Count Attila La Scala sat in the darkened room deep inside the mansion. His eyes were fixed on a flickering screen. Earphones covered his temples, and he had the volume turned high so the ranting voice and the cheering crowd seemed to storm inside his brain. The man on the flag-bedecked platform and the dark-shirted men and women in the vast stadium were fighting to escape the screen and return to the three-dimensional world.

They wanted to escape their celluloid crypt.

Again.

They would, he promised them. In spirit, at least, they would escape.

Sudden silence startled him. Crackling static followed. Then his aide's voice spoke to him briefly through the earphones. The picture continued on the screen.

"I apologize for the interruption, Count," the man said in Italian. "But I have news you must hear. I have just learned from our man at the morgue. The Americans are not among the dead recovered last night."

"Americans?" The count felt a wave of rage break over him. He needed the plural clarified.

"The man who calls himself Hawk is no longer alone,"

the voice in the earphones told him. "There was another man with him at the Contarini dal Bovolo Palace. We have no identification on him yet."

"Get it," La Scala ordered.

"Do you want him handled too, sir?"

"Just get the man's name and where we can reach him."

"Yes, sir. And, sir. There is more. A message from the doctor. About the *signorina*. He says, she is well."

The count smiled, his rage temporarily abated.

She was well.

He took the earphones from his head and laid them on the seat beside him. He flipped a switch on the chair arm and blinked as the film switched off and the overhead lights replaced the brightness of the screen.

He walked to the room's only door, dialed the combination lock, and let himself out.

With the door opening inward he faced the back of a massive painting by Veronese. The art work, hung from hinges on the right, swung aside at his touch. When he had the miniature theater room locked again and the painting back in position, he crossed his ornate bedroom to his private bath.

He considered himself in the mirror.

Satisfied, he tightened the belt around his robe, kicked off his slippers, and went to the door of the adjoining room. He opened it without knocking.

Regina Tirelli was resting, silent and languid, on her four-poster bed with the humped canopy across the top. Her eyes were closed until she heard his footsteps.

"Attila!" She made a slight gasping sound. Either she had assumed the passage between their two rooms was locked on her side, or she had never guessed he would enter so boldly.

She was not dressed in sleeping attire, but then it was early in the afternoon. Instead she lay on top of the bedspread in a black shimmering slip. The lace at the hem had angled seductively high along an unblemished bare thigh. The skin tones were warm ivory, the perfection Titian had tried to duplicate. There was a full-length slit with lavish open lacework joining the front and back gores of the slip. Enticing patterns of bare, pink-ivory flesh bloomed up her leg and as high as her waist.

The bra she wore was black too, solid nylon below, open lace above to reveal the soft flesh of her breasts rounding toward her nipples.

Her midriff was bare.

She hunched up until her elbows were on the plump pillows, but she did not try to pull down the slip.

"You didn't knock," she said in English.

He crossed and sat on the bed, letting his own robe fall open almost to his crotch. He wore nothing under the robe.

"The doctor says you are well," he told her.

She seemed relieved, guessing he had come to her room strictly out of concern.

"I've been trying to tell you that ever since I arrived," she said. "I've never been sick. Venice suits me."

The count explained. "The doctor means you are ready."

"Ready? I don't understand."

He leaned forward, hands on either side of her. His mouth moved gently against hers. Evidently it was not unpleasant to her. She did not ease him away until his one hand moved toward her breast.

"Attila, this is a little fast."

"You are ready," he told her again. "We must try every day and every night for a while." He kissed her neck. It was about all the tenderness he had in his amorous arsenal.

"Try!" Now she understood. "Oh, my God. That's why you've had the doctor check me."

"We will be married," he told her, "if you become pregnant. If you bear me a son."

The shock stimulated her, and she attempted to push him away. "Attila, not like this. Besides . . ."

"Besides what?"

"Nothing. Just not now. Please."

"Now. My father almost waited too long."

His right hand undid the tie around his middle as she attempted to slide away from him.

He pulled her back and rolled on top of her, one shoulder pinning her right arm, the hand on the same side reaching across to grab her left elbow.

She gave a little cry. Girls did not scream in her social circle.

But then his hand was pushing and sliding the hem of her slip farther up her legs, baring the lower portion of her thighs.

"No," she cried. Her mouth drew into a tight thin cut across her lower face. "I said not now. I mean it, Attila."

"Go ahead," he challenged. "Fight. That is the way I like it."

She squirmed and tossed under him, trying to drive a knee into the hardening rod between his legs. But his own legs spread hers, and the squirming only made it easier for him to push the slip completely up around her waist, revealing the patch of hair that she so jealously tried to protect.

When she screamed, he laughed.

The thick walls of the ancient palace were soundproof. He wondered how many other women had screamed their resistance in this very room through the centuries.

It did not matter.

She would serve her term here, ostensibly too sick to be moved, and after she had borne his son, she would feel differently or her friends in the States would be told she died in childbirth. It did not matter.

What mattered was that he would have a son, one related to a Mafia godfather. It would be a blood bind between him and the other families in the vast organization. He would not only have an heir, but he would have even more power—men of true, undaunted strength—behind him.

And he would have finally linked himself to that house on the mud flats behind Lido, the house which had distorted significance to him that even he did not understand.

The forbidden house.

He had never dared go there, never chanced looking at the room where it was said the woman had taken him in as her own.

He had never even dared send his underlings to check the wisps of rumor that the dead collaborator had returned from the grave and waited for him there. Only when exposure seemed imminent had Attila sent his troops close to the house, and they hadn't the faintest idea what they were fighting. They killed because they were told to kill.

Then he forgot the house again as he entered Regina with a crushing thrust of his throbbing, tumescent penis. His son had to be conceived in strength, in domination. He had to be born against the will of the womb that would carry him for nine months.

And then he felt his manhood explode and gush into its chosen receptacle. He roared with demonic laughter, drowning out the cries of the female he had selected to incubate his sperm.

The girl screamed louder at the virulence and potency of

intersecting moods that she had never before witnessed.

He would rape her again and again in the days ahead. She was his Mussolini, his weakling puppet to be used as he saw fit.

When he finally crawled off her, she lay limp, dry sobs choking her throat.

He picked up the phone from the bed stand, called one of the two powerful women who would care for her from now on. Then he ripped the line from the wall.

When the matronly servant entered, he silently retreated to his own room.

He showered, cleaning the excess sperm from his body with soap and a stiff bristle brush. He dried himself and dressed in slacks and a lamb's wool cardigan.

No uniform for him. No military stance. His father's way had failed. Attila would not make the same mistakes. He was already shaking the world, bringing it to the brink of collapse and he had not yet begun to fight.

He strutted to the top of the steps and looked down upon the men waiting for him in the vestibule of the palace. He posed for them, a histrionic figure considering them contemptuously from above, putting them in their place, underlings that would do as he told them, using the mystical power of his brain.

Slowly he came down the steps, looking at the gaggle of Portuguese peasants. All but one cowered as Attila came closer. The fifth stood his ground. He appeared to be the only one who would be articulate.

Here was the Portuguese rebel leader, a wooden figure heated to its kindling point.

No words passed between them as the count's servant allowed Attila to pass into the conference room. La Scala took his place at the head of the table where a carafe of water and a single glass waited for him. The rest of the long table was cleared. His chair had a tall leather back. The others would come no higher than a short man's shoulders. Most men who sat in them would never guess that the legs were an inch shorter than the average.

The Portuguese rebel leader sensed the ploy and stood.

He walked to the far end of the table from Attila.

"We wish to overthrow the government in Lisbon," he said clearly in his native tongue.

"Speak English," Attila told him. "It is the language of the international man."

The swarthy man with fire in his eyes repeated himself in his second language. "We wish to overthrow the government in Lisbon." His voice was louder than before.

Good, Attila thought. The training of a revolutionary had begun.

"You are going to unleash the fury of hell on the spineless weaklings in Lisbon who have let your great nation sink into the muck of so-called democracy," La Scala corrected him. "You will lead the people into the very halls of the corrupt government itself and tear out the hearts and bellies of the fat animals who have leeched life's blood from the peasants and the laborers. You will raise Portugal once more to the pinnacle it achieved when your ships and your armies conquered vast colonies around the entire globe."

His exaggerated tirade had begun.

The Portuguese guerrilla leader at the end of the table was taking in every word, committing the connotations and the intonations to memory. He was learning the use of fearful ambiguities, the imperative of wild flourishes, the power of barely perceptible insanity that made anyone afraid to resist.

Madness deliberately infiltrated into the most carefully plotted speech, that was the diabolical key.

Attila had learned it from years of watching the films and listening to the recordings in his hidden screening room. That room had been his kindergarten, his university.

The Portuguese rebel was the new student. He would learn from the master himself.

Spontaneously in his own language, in his own driving manner, he would charge his people to the point of rage. It was a matter of training and an ancient inbred talent that genes had carried forward from ancient times.

La Scala was satisfied. He was planting the seed for another revolution—the eventual, the inevitable bloodletting that fed his soul like warm mother's milk.

19

The storm hit Venice in the evening as an intermittent rain, and the city took on the mood of a fort preparing for a siege by overpowering forces. Women in galoshes and flapping black skirts somberly held huge black umbrellas with cane-shaped handles and spiked tops. Men wore shapeless rain jackets and old caps. Some carried lunches in red waterproof shoulder bags.

All stalked quickly through narrow streets, many heading for emergency rations at the vegetable shops where produce disappeared fast from beneath blue and red awnings. *Il Gazzettinos* closed early, though, to protect their newspapers, magazines, and postcards from being ruined by the first sheets of rain blown in on the quickening wind. Gondoliers tugged the long, decorative bows of their craft up on the paved shore or lashed them tight to candy-striped poles.

Water-buses remained undaunted, and a few taxis continued to operate for extra inducements, with tarps pulled over the drivers' seats.

Michael Hawk and George Pollock left their hotel after dark and ran along a board catwalk placed across a low-lying plaza where the wind-lashed lagoon sent heavy spray over the seawall. In the glare of overhead lights their reflections in

two-inch-deep water mirrored their grim faces as they rushed to buy raincoats. When they came out of the place, rubbers covered their shoes and caps protected their heads. They became a more integral part of Venice.

Sloshing through puddles, they watched men putting up boardwalks across Saint Mark's Square in anticipation of high tide and blasting winds. Elsewhere in the lagoon, rubber dams, seventy-five feet and longer, were being pumped full of water. Fully expanded and stretched across channels between flat mud islands, the giant bags would retard the tide and help reduce the flooding that periodically inundated the city.

When the two Americans had finally induced a water taxi to accept a fare, only Hawk climbed in.

"You know where I'll be," he said as the boat rocked under him, forcing him to sit rather than stand.

Pollock, water dripping off his nose, nodded and wiped a hand across his face. "I won't be far away. If you aren't out in a reasonable time, I'll be coming after you. But I still think you're on the wrong track."

The CIA man had queried Washington and the agency computer banks, although much of their valuable data had been purged in the post-Watergate era. The records contained nothing incriminating on Count La Scala except that he entertained a flamboyant guest list. He was indiscriminate. Notoriety was his sole criterion. And his wealth was large but not vast, old money not new. His family had traded and invested wisely since the fourteen hundreds. Attila, the last known heir, invested conservatively and used the money on parties and philanthropic trips around the world for the United Nations.

The computer had not picked up the connection Hawk and Ceperley thought they discovered between the Italian and future man-made disasters that seemed to occur in the path behind his wanderings.

But Pollock, too, was intrigued with the count's connection to the house across the lagoon where five people had died. His guest Regina Tirelli was a link that warranted investigation.

Pollock had not objected when Mike expressed a preference to see the count alone.

The CIA man was reluctant to bring his agency into the nebulous case, especially in a friendly country. Besides he

would have really preferred spending his night in the comfort of his hotel room. From there he would have justified his paycheck by reporting the aerial footnote to history that Hawk had discovered beneath the lagoon. Still he could not leave Mike without a backup.

So the agency man had taken a roundabout route to the palace while Hawk had taken the taxi down the Grand Canal.

The ex-journalist approached the count's home confidently, arriving at the same entrance he had used before. There, two private launches were tied to poles to prevent their being swept away in the coming storm.

When he rapped at the gate, a servant appeared, only to summarily turn Hawk away.

The count was busy, the doorman insisted. He was backed by an armed guard.

"And Signorina Tirelli has asked not to be disturbed," the doorman said stiffly.

"But damnit I have to see one or both of them. Tell them it's urgent."

The heavy doors came together in front of the American's face.

The reason for the rebuff was not entirely idiopathic, Mike conceded. The Italian nobleman could be furious that Hawk had involved Regina in a dangerous situation.

The lack of hospitality also fit the suspicions Mike was building in his mind. So he returned to the water taxis and instructed the Venetian to take him a short distance along the canal to the Grassi Palace, an imposing square structure in the classical style of eighteenth-century architecture. It now housed the International Center of Arts and Costumes.

Mike entered the nearly deserted building where only a guard was visible in the vestibule, and he was snoozing contentedly in an antique chair.

A few classes with sparse attendance were in session on the ground floor, but Mike passed them without incident.

After wandering until he found what he wanted—a window that opened to the roof on the next building—Hawk raised the heavy lower panel and crawled out into the cold wind slapping his face with rain.

The roofs were worse for footing than they had been the night before. Water coursed down between the upward arched tiles, and he slipped repeatedly, adding bruises to his already

injured body, while he worked his way across the tops of buildings toward the La Scala palace. He had no difficulty concealing himself in the dark. The drenching rain had gathered more velocity and had washed the streets virtually clean of people.

Eventually he was looking down into the courtyard of the count's palace.

The doorman and guard had apparently retreated inside. The other guards Mike had seen the night of the party were missing too.

Getting inside still wasn't easy. A six foot or more width of narrow canal separated the building he was on from the wall to the palace. He couldn't hope to leap completely over the stone barrier with its jagged glass cemented to the top. With the wind buffeting him and the rain pelting him and running down his neck, he had second thoughts. Was a story worth the chance of injury? Was there enough urgency in his investigation to warrant a man of his wealth chancing a charge of breaking and entering plus involvement with the unpredictable Italian police?

Then he remembered Giovanni Tirelli. The dedicated little Italian had been blown to pieces in Hawk's place. There was Regina to be considered too.

And finally his curiosity had to be satisfied. No way was he going to quit while he still had so many unanswered questions.

So he took off his new raincoat and tossed the expensive garment across the top of the wall. Leaping from the roof, he fell with his navel landing on the jagged points. Some of the shards gashed through to his skin, but he was able to swing himself over, dragging his torn coat with him. He put it on and ducked into the cover of the bushes.

The rain abated briefly, but a new element had been added: distant thunder that reminded him of cannonading he had heard too often in his coverage of war. He judged how long it would take for the lightning to approach and decided it would be only a matter of minutes before the city glittered under jagged flares from the sky.

He considered waiting in his miserably cold wet coven in the bushes but dismissed the precautionary plan. Pollock would be coming after him before too long, and Hawk wanted time alone in the palace.

He did not know exactly what he was searching for, but this is where the clues had led him, and he believed in following a straight trail when possible. So he waited only until the rain came in blinding sheets again; then he moved through an arch and into the protection of a covered entry. A door opened from the far end of the short tunnel. It was locked, but the old wood frame offered an opportunity. With his penknife he worked at the rotted pulp until he freed the metal catch that held the latch. When he pulled steadily, the door inched toward him.

He slipped into a dark hallway. Off it he heard women chatting in Italian as they cooked. From the smells it was apparent they fed a hedonistic appetite for the count and his friends. Since the sound of rain splatting against glass told him a door to the kitchen was partially open, Mike slipped cautiously along the hall.

Finally he found himself in the spacious vestibule. The vast room with its wide, curved staircase was a shadowy dungeon. Equestrian statues with *condottieres* mounted on fierce charging steeds threatened him from deep alcoves along the wall. The entire room was dominated by art treasures of strength in motion.

The circular room with a mosaic glass-domed ceiling reeked of relentless power. Hawk became a lone slave amidst a conquering army of art. Lesser men would have been psychologically tempted to cower before the ruthless Trojans and Roman legions cast in bronze or cut from stone.

No wonder the guests had not been funneled through here for the party, he thought. The mood was morose and gray. The room was totally dominated by the warriors seemingly risen from their graves to avenge themselves on the first available person who dared enter their eerie field of battle.

The thunder grew louder. It added the rumble of artillery fire and the sharp crack of hand-held weapons. There were crossed swords, iron maces, suits of armor, axes with deadly spikes on the end of the handle, loaded crossbows, and primitive firearms displayed everywhere.

The room was malignant.

Hawk sensed that he could not remain here.

He still was not quite certain why he had come to the palace, but the aura of evil confirmed his decision. Maybe here he could piece together the demonic, bold scheme that

had started in Berlin decades ago and nearly ended in the silt of the Venetian lagoon. He even imagined that he comprehended the *élan vital*, the vital force, that had kept the scheme alive until the present.

The debased, perverted corona that gave the pavilionlike vestibule its threatening strength had also risen from the submerged aircraft and the upper floors of the Tirelli home. Although the sensations were entirely cerebral, the experience was like watching a falcon trained to kill as it swooped down out of the sky.

But how did one fight a phantom, a zephyr if it had taken on flesh and blood?

He didn't know. For now he would do what seemed easiest.

He went searching for Regina Tirelli. Cautiously he climbed the staircase although voices echoed through the palace. The unintelligible whispers came from all directions in the vast labyrinth of rooms and passageways.

At the top of the stairs his search became surprisingly easy.

Entrances to only two of the rooms were topped with internal oblique arches, one enlivened with spirited horses, the other done in a feminine motif.

He chose the obvious one. The knob refused to yield, but he could hear someone working the latch inside.

The thick wooden door swung aside, and he stared into the fat, moon-face of a powerfully built woman. Nothing in her features vitiated the first impression that here stood the beast of Buchenwald, a woman who could strip flesh off living human beings and fashion a lampshade from the dried patches.

Regina's voice shrilled through thunder that was now louder and more threatening. "Michael! Help me! Please!"

The door started to close.

His theories could no longer retain scientific restraint. The cry for help forced him to accept without awaiting further proof of what he had only surmised.

He threw his shoulder into the door, catching the big woman off-balance and sending her floundering backward.

Considering no other approach, Mike was on her instantly. Drawing his gun from its holster and holding it by the barrel, he fell to the floor with her. As her thick arms began to encircle him, he cracked the pistol butt hard against the woman's skull.

Blood dirtied his hand while the matron melted like the last wax of a burnt-out candle.

Whether she was dead or unconscious didn't trouble him. Regina was crawling from the bed and trying to reach him.

He closed and latched the door before the girl touched him, her face streaked with tears.

"Oh, Michael, he . . . he raped me."

She sagged into the tall man's arms. He tried to comfort her, but she was nearly hysterical.

"Attila," she cried. "It was Attila." As if he couldn't guess. "Oh, Michael, the doctor, I wasn't sick. It was him. Attila. He wanted to know . . . wanted to know . . . oh, God!"

The Orwellian horror of what she was trying to say struck him with the force of a fall from a promontory of land to jagged rocks below.

Attila was following some maniacal mode, preparing for the future.

"Get dressed." He eased her away. "You have to get out of here."

He dragged her to the closet where he tore slacks, blouse, and sweater from the hangers. Her trembling arms needed help; he forced her into things before giving her flat shoes and wrapping her in rain gear.

He half carried her to the door of the room.

"Oh, Michael, I think he was going to keep me prisoner. I think the police came, about Giovanni, but he told them I left for the States yesterday. I heard those awful women talking."

"Just get out of here," he urged. "Fast."

"You're coming with me?" she pleaded. "I can't be alone."

"You must. But I'll watch from the balcony. Don't try the canal exit. Go out through the hall past the kitchen. That's how I got in. Climb the wall to the alley at the back of the house. Throw your coat over the glass and stay away from the gate. That's probably watched by somebody. Once you're in the plaza, run like hell."

"What about you?"

What about him?

He wasn't certain what he would do next. He only knew that he was up against a diabolical force beyond the strength of man. He'd have to stay and fight and hope.

Maybe he would have to kill.

He just didn't know.

"Find a hotel," he said, pressing money into her hand.

"How will you find me?" The logic of her question was unnerving. She couldn't go to the place he was staying. She would be too easily traced there. Her only hope was to hole up somewhere that even he couldn't pinpoint exactly in case he was captured during what was to follow. Once in the devil's hands alive, no inner strength could silence his tongue against the agonies of the torture he could expect.

He chose the first place that came to mind.

"In Saint Mark's Square." The vast tourist attraction would be deserted, but its size and the shelters of its outdoor restaurants would provide her with plenty of hiding places to watch for him without being seen. She would have a good chance of escaping if La Scala or one of his men traced her to the area. "Be there at midnight," he said. The time was as good as any, and it perversely fit the nature of the battle left to be fought.

"Go," he ordered.

She hesitated and he shoved her out onto the balcony overlooking the vestibule.

He watched her hurry painfully down the stairs and disappear toward the kitchen.

Then he looked behind him and saw the woman staring up at him from the floor.

She had overheard, he realized. If she spoke English, she knew where Regina would meet him at midnight.

He brought out his gun and aimed. He considered killing her, but he couldn't. There was no evidence that she was involved enough to deserve execution.

Instead he moved to the bed and ripped off a sheet. He tore the bedding into strips. With the barrel of the gun, he motioned for the woman to roll over on her stomach.

She obeyed and he stooped. Pressing a knee into her lower spine, he holstered the gun and tied her hands behind her back. He made a wad of cloth and forced it into her mouth, completing the gag with a strip of sheet tied around her head. Her feet were next. Then he dragged her heavy bulk into the bathroom and fastened her to the porcelain leg of the washbasin.

He returned to the bed and tried to make a body out of clothes stuffed beneath the covers. Only with the lights switched off would the dummy fool anyone.

Having given Regina the best start he could, he left the bedroom and stood on the balcony making certain the ghostly oval expanse below was empty.

It wasn't.

A woman in a wheelchair was being pushed toward a dining room by a female servant.

At first Hawk found it difficult to recognize the woman in the chair from above. Then he remembered the party and the brief introduction Attila had made.

This was his aunt, he had said. Aunt. What else had been said about the woman?

Oh, yes. She had come to the palace to care for Attila when his parents had been killed.

Curious and spotting an opportunity, he moved along the rooms fronting the balcony until he found another with a feminine design on the entry. He tried the door, found it unlocked, and stepped inside.

It was definitely an old woman's room. Medicine bottles were neatly lined up on the bedstand, and there was a lap robe folded on the overstuffed chair. A quick check of the closet and bath satisfied him that he was in the aunt's quarters. The closet held shapeless dresses, and the cup for false teeth in the bath was further evidence that he was in the right place.

Still curious he stood in the center of the carpet and pivoted slowly.

There was no crucifix or altar in sight.

He found that curious. An Italian woman her age could be expected to consider herself in need of religious reassurance.

There were original paintings on the walls, but no statues of the Virgin Mary. On the dressing table and the top of the chest of drawers were chronological photographs of Attila from infancy to his early twenties. After that he must have balked at posing.

There were more mementos too: a silver spoon suitable for baby food, certificates from tutors attesting to the count's private education, an infant's knit cap, a bootie, birthday cards signed by Attila, and expensive trinkets the count must have brought back from his many trips.

Apparently the woman lived only for her nephew. There was no suggestion that she had ever married. And strangely no photos of Attila's parents.

And suddenly Hawk knew who the woman really was. The truth hammered him in the face.

All the pieces were falling into place. It was as if a motion-picture film of a shattering vase had been run in reverse. Everything popped into its original purpose.

Back on the balcony Hawk could see the dining room door had been closed. He started down only to stop abruptly.

A servant, a tall, blond man, came from the direction of the kitchen to knock at the double doors of another room below. After waiting an appropriate time, the man carried in a tray of hors d'oeuvres, sandwiches, and wine.

He emerged in a few seconds to disappear the way he had come.

At the top of the staircase with the crashes of thunder tumbling together in chaotic battle, and the warriors in the vestibule more ominous than before, Michael Hawk stood with his gun.

He knew what he had to do.

He had to go through the door the servant had entered, but he questioned whether he would ever come out alive.

20

Michael Hawk entered the conference hall so quietly the five Portuguese with their backs to him did not hear. Count La Scala, although he faced the intruder, was so involved in his own wild and insane tirade that he failed to notice quickly enough.

Immediately Hawk understood the madman's audacious tactics.

La Scala was a teacher, a Machiavellian professor with primitive powers cloaked in his disdain and Aryan superiority.

In his own self-induced séance he was demonstrating methods of stirring crowds to share his own megalomania against real and imagined enemies.

His verbal assault was a louder attack of words than Fidel Castro's speeches that laid siege to an audience for hours at a time. His phrases were more obscure and inflaming than those in Mao's little Red Book.

He outdid Adolf Hitler's rantings delivered to massive crowds while thousands of swastikas fluttered or flamed in giant amphitheaters. He surpassed Benito Mussolini's posturing. He was more stirring than Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside chats, more charismatic than John F. Kennedy's calls for sacrifice. His mind, his throat, would move men with the

subtle strength of Lincoln's Gettysburg address or Winston Churchill's pronouncement of his nation's darkest hour.

We had a messiah's hypnotic force to bring thousands into a self-sacrificing cult; he possessed the machismo that a street gang leader needed to urge boys into senseless brutality.

His voice confected word pictures that could make masses lust for dense rivulets of blood.

And Michael Hawk recognized at once: here was a talent that had been nurtured since birth. Like a maestro of the piano, the man must have followed a single calling every day of his life. Everything he did, everyone he met must have been weighed as to how it furthered his single skill.

But La Scala had chosen not to use his talent before the masses himself.

He taught others what it had taken him half a lifetime to master.

Hawk understood because one of the Portuguese was on his feet. The olive-skinned man mimicked the master, preparing himself to talk thousands of others into laying down their lives for him.

Alone or with a few fanatic followers, the rebel would be no more than a nuisance to his country. With the count's training he could recruit a thousand mindless soldiers with each speech, two thousand arms to carry guns or set terrorist bombs.

Plodders, whose lives were so crepuscular or uneventful, the flotsam in a sea of human sweat, could create a deafening roar when led by a man with the mystic vocal muscles that the count could train.

Totally fascinated, Mike listened to the man at the other end of the room and his protégé haranguing an imaginary mob to rebellion.

La Scala was a giant among giants in his specialty. His was the heritage of popular tyrants who had roused people into wars, acts of terrorism, cruelty beyond imagination, and pointless crusades ever since the first quill scratch of recorded history.

Then the verbal bombardment stopped abruptly as the count felt the presence of a newcomer.

Beyond colored-glass windows behind him lightning flashed, rain cascaded, and thunder clapped.

Only the humans in the room were silent.

The walls echoed the outpouring of rage. The floors seemed to quiver under the stomping of marching boots. Imaginary drums beat to a cadence of hatred. Bugles from hell sounded the charge.

The devil's disciple might have called down the storm for his own background.

"You!" Attila shouted at Michael Hawk. The man's eyes were turquoise jewels of shock and hate.

The men from Portugal turned. They could not comprehend what force was insidious enough to have silenced the count and their own newly inspired pharaoh.

In their mesmerized state they apparently did not see the gun in Hawk's hand. They were entranced beyond reason.

Nor did they guess the impact of the American's first question.

"How is your German nanny tonight, Attila?" Hawk taunted the orator of evil.

La Scala's face colored lobster red. His eyes narrowed to slits like those of a tank going into battle. His fists clenched until the knuckles shined like metal mitten gauntlets from the Middle Ages.

He moved closer to the table, but Mike's gun rose to discourage him. There was undoubtedly a button that summoned help beneath the mahogany top.

"Nanny?" Attila stiffened. "I was born powerful. I sucked at an iron tit. If you refer to my aunt . . ."

"Frau Schwein," Hawk said, remembering the nurse who had boarded the last transport plane from encircled Berlin. "She's no aunt of yours, but the same inhuman kind of blood must flow through both your veins."

The count's vulnerability flared at the mention of the woman's name. His lids formed the protective visor of a knight's helmet over his eyes, but nothing concealed the faint glint of fear.

Hawk knew he had found the weak points in the fearsome man's armor.

"Do I call you Herr Hitler?" Mike jabbed a verbal lance. "Or Herr Braun. You were born before they were married, that's for certain."

The Portuguese did not have to speak English fluently to hear the name that had terrified the world a generation before.

Hitler.

"My name is La Scala," the count shouted. "Not Hitler. Not Braun."

"Maybe Eva Braun was not your mother," the ex-reporter admitted, "but your father was the Third Reich's Satan himself. Two planes weren't flown into the heart of besieged Berlin to bring out wounded or one insignificant nurse. The Junkers were brought in to transport what Frau Schwein carried in her arms. You, Herr Hitler."

The man at the far end of the table shouted, "You are insane. You talk madness."

"No. And I think I can piece together all the details. When your father knew the end was near, he had you, his son, flown out of the dying capital. The pilot expected to bring you to Venice where Nazi troops still controlled the city. But the plane arrived the day the partisans were taking over the airfield too, no doubt."

"I won't listen to this outrage," the accused man roared.

"You'll listen." The gun rose until the barrel pointed squarely between the narrowed eyes. "The pilot crash-landed in the mud flats. He died. I saw his skeleton, but the nurse lived. She carried you to a house the Germans had occupied for months. Magdalena Tirelli saw the nurse carrying you. A collaborator, Mrs. Tirelli took you and Frau Schwein in gladly."

Hawk paused. He watched the other man's eyes even closer, reading the dull inner focus.

Attila could no longer control the expression on his face. His complexion paled. Strength left his arms. He had never dreamed anyone would track this link to his past.

How many nights after he grew old enough to be told the truth did he want to return to that house on the island behind the Lido?

The Tirelli woman had taken on a misty vision in his life. She had mothered him for only one night, Frau Schwein had said, but the Italian woman cried when the infant was taken from her.

Everyone else in his life—his parents, the nurse he called "aunt," and the two SS generals who had stayed with him until their deaths from old age—all of them had cared for him only as an embodiment of the defeated Germany's hopes. They wanted only to train and shape him. They molded him into an improved image of his father. They made him a

well-crafted machine designed to continue the havoc the man in the Berlin bunker had spread worldwide until trapped beneath his own capital's rubble.

The two generals had followed his father's orders with blind obedience just as they had through the war.

And they had forbidden Attila to go near the house on the island for fear of leading someone to the telltale aircraft buried in the mud. They had told him the Tirelli woman had been killed by the Italian partisans for helping him. In his mind her death justified everything he did.

"You can prove nothing of this," he said defensively as he returned from the caves inside his brain. "You have no evidence."

"A baby's bootie." Mike fenced with him. "Identical to the one Frau Schwein still cherishes. The Tirelli woman kept hers too."

"Kept hers?" Attila's waxen face began to show the first lines of a smile. He thought he had found the flaw in his accuser's case.

"Yes," Mike replied. "She kept it all these years. You-see, Attila, the partisans didn't kill the woman who cared for you that night. Neither did your father's henchmen, although they tried. They machine-gunned her and left her for dead. But she didn't die, Attila, son of Hitler. Did you know that? She has lived all these years, sitting in the window, looking out at the path Frau Schwein took when she carried you to the house after the crash."

"You lie," the Führer's son said stoically. "My name is La Scala."

"No. The woman lived, and you were brought here. The La Scala family, including an infant son, I imagine, were removed—massacred no doubt by whoever took care of you. Then you were brought up in isolation, raised as the last remaining heir to the La Scala fortune. It wasn't too hard to pull off after the turmoil of a war. I imagine there were plenty of Italian officials who could be blackmailed about their wartime activities who felt forging a few papers was a small price to pay for staying alive. They probably never dreamed it wasn't the two German generals they were protecting but Adolf Hitler's son."

Young Hitler's voice changed. "I want to see this Tirelli woman," he said quietly.

Hawk bluffed. "At your trial," he said with confidence.

"Trial? I have done nothing wrong."

"No wars, no concentration camps, no furnaces, no mass executions, no crimes against reason? To you I suppose a few murders to cover your identity does seem like nothing."

"I said, I have done nothing."

"You were doing it when I came in," Hawk said. "You aren't repeating the mistakes of your father. No one can connect you directly to the conversion of men into beasts. You're not personally waging hopeless wars just for the glory of death. Instead you teach the potential terrorists, the mass murderers, the potential maniacs, and the bloodthirsty revolutionaries. You show them how to rouse people to the heights of cruelty."

"You have no proof."

Hawk spoke softly. "Oh, but again I do. An itinerary of your travels around the world, and the sadistic brutality you unleashed in others wherever you went. You're responsible for a large part of the world's turmoil. You are waging a greater war than your father, and you're doing it without soiling your hands or even smearing your own phony name. Why, Herr Hitler? For the sheer bestial pleasure it gives you, or do you have plans to conquer more people, more territory than your father's juggernauts could dominate at their zenith?"

The monster who made speech into the most evil of weapons did not respond.

"Come with me now," Hawk commanded, "or this gun will be the only jury, judge, and executioner you will ever have." He tipped the weapon slightly to clarify his determination.

"Kill him," Hitler shouted to the Portuguese.

The man standing near the table yanked at a Savage M/915 pistol in his belt.

The barrel never cleared.

Hawk fired once and his bullet sheared flesh from the man's face as neatly as wool is sheared from sheep. The bullet continued back and diagonally into the lower skull. The victim slammed against the wall. His blood smeared an allegorical masterpiece by Francesco Montemezzano before he pitched forward on his face.

Another would-be revolutionary dived for the gun as it slid

across the floor. His revolution died with him before it began.

The wiser or more cowardly raised their hands in surrender. They came out of their seats, unwittingly providing a momentary wall to conceal the offspring of Adolf Hitler before Michael Hawk could fire the killing shot.

Attila's move so startled Hawk that he would have missed in any case.

The German ran straight toward a Titian painting hanging on the nearest wall. He broke through the canvas like a cheerleader popping through a paper banner held between the goalposts before the first quarter of a football game.

Mike scooped up the weapon on the floor and darted into the dark passage behind the destroyed painting. He fired once but heard no scream or grunt of pain.

He started deeper into the blackness, heard two voices speaking excitedly in German, and flopped on the floor of the concealed hall. Bullets chattered above him.

Using the Savage pistol held in his left hand, he fired until the hammer fell on a dead shell. He heard a cry after his third shot but continued to shoot, taking no chances. Then he dropped the Savage and backed into the conference room.

The remaining three Portuguese were bending over their fallen comrades. With their leader dead, they threw up their hands and wailed in confusion.

Mike dashed past them and into the vestibule only to crash head on into a tall figure carrying an automatic weapon in his hands. The ugly Dardick flew from Hawk's grip, and in desperation he tried to yank the submachine gun from the bodyguard. Briefly they waltzed, then they jammed knees at each other's groin. In the darkness between flashes of lightning suddenly neither one of them had a weapon. The one they fought over went flying into an alcove.

In a karate stance the guard's dark figure started to close on the American. Hawk whirled. He was not a karate expert. He was a street fighter; he fought with whatever was at hand. When he saw a spiked axe head illuminated on the wall by a burst of light, he grabbed the ancient weapon.

Leveling the six-foot-long handle, the former journalist charged.

The man in the karate stance froze. All the superiority flushed from his face just before the ancient foot-long spike pierced his chest. The momentum carried both men toward

the wall. The bodyguard was pinned against a painting depicting the glories of Venetian military might.

The screams were drowned in thunder and blood.

Hawk pulled back. The spike held fast although the doomed man attempted to eject the metal from his lungs with his own trembling hands. Sickened, Mike looked away as he put a foot against the victim's body and hauled backward. The spike came out followed by a gusher of blood.

There was no time for pity.

Another guard was rushing into the vestibule from the kitchen. Hawk swung the ancient poleax and chopped so deeply into a leg that the second man crumpled. He skidded across the floor. He didn't die fast. His fate was to watch the life pour from his dangling limb. His cries joined the explosive thunder and the crack of gunfire elsewhere in the house.

Hawk was confused.

When he found his own gun again, he sought a target, only to realize the shooting was not directed at him.

The next few minutes were madness. The lights throughout the building died. In a nightmare of illusions he rushed through the palace, catching glimpses of young Hitler and more of his private brigade. Mike fired, shots that should have killed the professor of death and didn't.

He confronted more bodyguards, but they aimed short blasts and evaded him as they dashed off on some new mission.

Bullets ripped Mike's clothes.

He was lost, his only ally the short glow of lightning. His mind numbed, he stumbled against statues that toppled from their alcoves. The heavy bronze equestrians missed him by inches.

He happened into the dining room where candles burned on a beautifully set table the length of most living rooms.

Frau Schwein's wheelchair had toppled. Its occupant was dead, staring up with dry eyes that reflected the flame of the candles.

Mike could guess who had killed her.

Attila.

Hawk had no proof, but the young Hitler must have realized that killing the American would not be enough. He would have to destroy the nurse who had brought him out of the

bowels of the earth and helped form him into a twentieth-century monster.

Back in the conference room Hawk stumbled over another explanation of the firing not aimed at him.

The remaining Portuguese rebels were sitting against a wall, arms limp at their sides, heads cocked. All dead.

Stunned, the American made his way up the stairs to Regina Tirelli's room.

He found what he feared most. The heavyset woman who had guarded Regina was still tied to the porcelain leg of the sink, but the gag was removed. The woman's head had been chopped to pieces by a machine gun used at close range.

Down in the kitchen he found more dead.

He was alone in the haunted palace. He was left with the corpses of all those who might know too much about Count La Scala.

And he knew where Attila and the most trusted of his small army had fled.

They had extracted what they had needed to know from the woman who had guarded Regina. The woman probably willingly told what she overheard, never guessing she would be slaughtered.

Attila knew where Regina would be at midnight.

The devil had gone for his bride. He would claim her and run for some new cave probably chosen well in advance for just such events as had revealed his true identity tonight. He'd hide there for a time, then emerge under a new name to begin his teachings all over again.

And only one free man could tell that the monster cremated in Berlin decades before had fathered a son.

Only Michael Hawk knew. And who would believe him?

In the midst of panic the cool-thinking Attila had realized Hawk was no threat at all. The journalist couldn't prove his allegations in court. He had too much blood on his hands.

But then, too, the time had come for the son of Hitler to dispense with his disguise as the Count La Scala. Too many had died.

Besides, the American's wild claims would be unimportant if Attila got to Saint Mark's Square in time to catch the mother of his child. With her and a few close associates he could disappear before the police sorted out the massacre at the palace.

Worse yet, as only Hawk knew, he was a fugitive of sorts himself. Any extensive investigation would lead to his own vast illegal wealth.

So Michael Hawk had only two viable choices.

He could run. Escape Venice. Live. Or he could keep his date with destiny at midnight.

21

Michael Hawk burst out the same palace door that he had entered, but even as he started through, he realized his mistake.

La Scala would never have left without arranging for his murder.

Mike's muscles responded to the thought. The detonation of thunder gave him a distraction that lasted a fraction of a second. He dived to the side before a machine pistol crackled. Bullets hit the doorframe and chipped holes into the stone of the ancient building. The perforations moved rapidly across the muddy garden where Hawk had rolled. He had his gun out and was attempting to get his arm above his head for a shot, but the track of bullets was gaining on him.

He braced for the searing pain of multiple wounds.

Suddenly the flashes from the machine gun ceased chasing him and pointed at the sky.

Even the gale seemed to quiet.

"Hawk?" George Pollock shouted from the top of the wall. "You all right?"

Mike could have kissed him.

Instead he yelled. "Where the hell you been?"

"Me?" Pollock sputtered. "I saw three or four men leave

the palace. I thought you were dead, and then I spotted this one guy left behind.''

''Which way did they leave?''

''The first three guys? By way of the canal.''

Mike checked the luminous dial on his watch, and his heart thumped with urgency. It was only minutes before midnight.

Picking himself out of the muck, he ran toward the canal gate; it was the fastest route to Saint Mark's. Pollock was right behind him.

They left cautiously. No boats were tied to the candy-striped poles. One was gone entirely, and the other had been cut loose and set adrift. The force of the gale, though, had driven it against the wall. Hanging onto Pollock's hand, Mike could get his fingers on the bow. When he had drawn it close enough, he jumped in.

So did Pollock.

''Where we going?'' the agent yelled. ''What happened in the palace?''

Mike crouched behind the windshield to avoid the waves washing over them from the wind-riled canal. In the tossing, lurching boat he attempted to explain the battle. He told his incredulous passenger about Regina and Attila, the reincarnated monster running loose in the world. He explained the midnight rendezvous.

The CIA agent had difficulty absorbing the bizarre details, but he rode along silently as they made straight for the lagoon. In the wild open water they turned toward Saint Mark's Square.

Mike rammed the motorboat into a pier and jumped out, his gun ready, and Pollock trailed his footsteps.

They rushed along the Ducal Palace on the right of Saint Mark's Piazzetta. The smaller square opened on the water where Mike had put himself and George Pollock ashore. The other end of the Piazzetta led to the more famous tourist attraction where Regina Tirelli would be waiting.

The wind sweeping in off the lagoon from the sea buffeted them with icy sheets of rain. Lights were blurred dots in the storm. Hawk could judge his position only by the tall stone columns where those condemned to death had once been executed.

Atop one of the twin towers was a statue of San Teodoro, the first protector of the Venetians. Had he been a religious

man, the American might have prayed for all the help he could get. He carried the Dardick pistol and one spare clip, but he feared what lay ahead as much as he had ever feared anything or anyone. The opponent he expected to face in the raging elements was not unlike the dominating figure at the top of the second pillar—the bronze Lion from the Orient, powerful, ferocious, and mystic.

Hawk could not forget the number of shots he had fired at the mad count in the battle at the palace. The bullets had missed when they should have hit home. It was unnerving, as if the man, the offspring of the vicious Adolf Hitler, were some invincible demon.

His failure to kill La Scala earlier only intensified Hawk's resolve. It had to be done now. The man couldn't be allowed to roam free, seeding the world with more hate and destruction.

Yet the determined American wasn't certain his gun alone could stop what the Führer had bequeathed mankind years before.

Squeezing the prospect of defeat from his mind, Mike sloshed through water six inches deep as he and Pollock ran to the vast trapezoid-shaped main square. They came out close to the basilica itself. Byzantine in design, its great domes with Greek crosses on top reached defiantly into the storm.

"Here?" George asked, shouting over the wind. "How the hell are we going to find him?"

"And her," Hawk replied.

Pollock hung back. He was still trying to accept that they were hunting the only known progeny of the twentieth-century devil Hitler. It was as though they were fighting a phoenix. The legendary bird had lived five hundred years, burned itself on a pyre, then rose youthfully from the ashes to live again.

Adolf Hitler had died by his own hand. His corpse had been burned in the shell-pocked garden above his bunker along with his wife of a few hours.

Now Hawk hunted the son. He was here somewhere in the flooded square under the watchful eye of the Bell Tower and the magnificent Clock Tower, now striking the hour.

Once, twice, three times—the two dark bronze figures on top struck the giant bell. Called "Moors," the larger-than-life

men in primitive loincloth attire hammered out the count to midnight while under them a Venetian Lion glowered at the late-night intruders. Below the animal on a semicircular balcony three magi preceded by an angel were designed to appear, kneel before the Madonna, and disappear through another door during every hour of the Ascension Week.

More than a religious center, the vast square was a monument to power, to strength, to the sword of the righteous crusaders as well as barbarian killers.

It was here Michael Hawk would have to fight his devil. And as the bell struck the last note of midnight, he called to his enemey.

"Attila? Are you here?"

A pistol shot answered him.

So did the girl. "Michael!" Regina Tirelli cried from the center of the square.

Only by following the direction of her voice could Hawk see the vague figure, pelted by rain, leaning into the wind.

"Ah, no," he groaned. "Get back, Regina. Hide."

His call was carried away in the swirling wind.

He knew what Attila had to have. The girl and the son that might already be forming in her womb.

"George," Hawk pleaded, "go to the girl. Protect her."

Pollock faded into the rain while Mike ducked beneath a balcony which held four horses gilded with copper. From a column a few feet away, a gun flashed. The bullet chipped the facade of the building near the American. Lightning rent the sky, illuminating the man with a gun.

Hawk fired a wild volley. The shots tore off the man's gun hand at the wrist. In the next light the young stranger was visible on his knees, blood staining the water as he sought the missing gun and the hand that held it.

More bullets cracked around the ex-journalist, and he had no idea on which side of the pillar to hide.

When the sky flared again, he waited until its afterglow blinded his retina. Hoping his enemies were similarly affected, he splashed into the deeper water to cross the square.

Midway the night brightened again.

He could see Pollock rushing the girl to an outdoor restaurant where chairs and tables brought in from the rain were stacked against the walls. He saw Attila, flanked by two men.

In Michael Hawk's mind all three wore brown shirts and

matching trousers, bloused above knee-high boots. Hitler reincarnate wore a Sam Brown belt stretched diagonally across his chest. All their backs were ramrod straight, their arrogant heads high, their chins and right arms thrust out belligerently.

But that was his imagination.

The truth was that the two men flanking La Scala carried submachine guns, and the second-generation Hitler was shouting as loud as his father had ever screamed at an approving crowd.

"Die, Hawk, die."

The machine guns rattled and bullets hailed around the running man.

Bending his elbow for a gun rest, Mike fired as he ran. He emptied the clip. One of the machine gunners fell backward, his weapon spraying the air. With his dead finger locked in the trigger housing, he emptied his gun as he died. Attila and his last bodyguard had to leap aside to avoid the wild shots. They both went down in the water that covered the white lines designed to lead the tourist's eyes to the great basilica.

Hawk reached the safety of the other side. There he crouched behind a stack of café furniture. He released the empty clip from the Dardick pistol and inserted the last fourteen bullets he possessed.

The remaining machine gunner knew his general position and was chipping the stacked furniture with slugs. Hawk returned the fire. So did Pollock from the same side of the square. The bodyguard, one arm hanging limp from his side, came staggering forward and shooting at the starbursts issuing from Hawk's position.

Mike put a bullet through the wounded zealot's chest.

The eerie silence that occasionally pervades a battlefield settled across the square. Thunder and lightning lessened and the shooting ceased.

Hawk burst out of his cover, intending to confuse his enemy by attacking from another flank.

The first loud sound to break the partial silence was a police siren. The battle had been reported. Neither Attila nor Hawk could afford to be caught among the corpses. Yet neither dared run.

The preacher of terror could not face the rape and murder charges, nor did he want to leave anyone free and alive who

knew the truth about him if he could prevent it. Once aired, there would always be doubts about his birthright.

Likewise Hawk could never justify why he had killed so many. His story about the son of Hitler would be hard to explain. His secret reign as controller of vast illegal wealth could be jeopardized too.

The finale had to come now.

The storm struck again with a lion's roar of thunder and a jagged saw blade of lightning cutting the darkness.

In the brilliant flash Hawk saw Attila, legs spread, in the center of the square too. Less than a hundred feet separated them. Neither knew whether the other had men concealed along the sides or not.

The Nazi would not retreat, Mike decided. The spreader of agony would not seek cover in a basilica.

Whether he was a real devil in the flesh or only imagined himself to be some form of superior monster didn't matter. The new Hitler would not expect succor in a place of worship.

Hawk could not let the man live. In his heart he was positive the so-called count was the new Dracula, a modern-day Frankenstein, a vampire that fed on brains rather than blood.

Here was the most clever of warlocks. He taught disciples to spread his hate.

Fatalistically Michael Hawk walked toward the lone figure. As he walked, he fired, counting each shot. He held the gun with the butt cupped in his outstretched left hand, and he pulled the trigger with a steady, measured cadence.

Attila chose the same final tactic. He marched forward, shooting as if he felt immortality made him impervious to man-made weapons.

George Pollock was about to enter the shoot-out when Mike discouraged him.

"Stay away. Save the girl."

A bullet ripped through Hawk's raincoat and he let the garment slide off his shoulders.

Thunder clamored. Lightning erupted. The wind buffeted the two foes who shortened the distance between them.

Nothing stopped Attila. Perhaps he was invincible, inhuman.

Hot lead burned the tender flesh on the inside of Hawk's leg just below his testicles. In his mind the shadowy, blurred

figure approaching him became an army of helmeted storm troopers. Hawk had to concentrate on shooting toward the middle shape.

"*Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer.*" Words he did not think he knew poured from a place inside his skull. Thousands of voices chanted the old slogan. "One People, One Government, One Leader."

He imagined he saw the *Geheime Staatspolizei*! Heard the screams of the people tortured at the hands of the infamous gestapo. Smelled burning flesh from the gas ovens. Remembered pictures of the surviving skeletons rescued from the concentration camps.

The power of suggestion created entire grotesque scenes in his brain. The storm and the pain from his wounds fostered thoughts that overpowered his cynicism about the supernatural.

His imagination and memories of what the first Hitler had done propelled him on.

He took no evasive action. Nor did he feel any satisfaction when he saw Attila Hitler stumble as a slug finally wounded the approaching devil.

Kill. Kill, Hawk told himself.

Only death would stop some of the violence this one man could spread with more skill than his own father.

But what did it take, Hawk wondered as the distance between them shortened to only a few yards. A silver bullet? A wooden stake driven through the heart?

He didn't know, and he was running out of bullets. Five, four. He stopped, only a few feet from his target, raised the Dardick closer to his eye, took perfect aim, and squeezed the trigger slowly. The gun bucked in his hand.

He couldn't have missed, but Hitler was still on his feet.

The monster paused. His own gun was empty or the lightning had blinded him. Or he had seen the determination in Michael Hawk's face. He seemed to look past the lone American as if there were some new, unexpected force beyond him.

Attila Hitler laughed. His maniacal cackle crowed with victory.

He lowered his own gun, convinced of his own invincibility. He waited for Mike to shoot, but the American was

transfixed. Suddenly Hawk thought he knew what it would take to return a phoenix to its ashes.

More than a bullet.

Maybe he was shaken from the horrors of the past few days, he thought. Maybe he was being foolish about his belief that he had met an enemy unlike any he had ever known.

In any case he could not bring himself to waste another shot even as Hitler began to back away.

Attila held his gun up as cover, but Hawk doubted it contained a live shell. Hawk, a man who usually gambled, couldn't fire his last two shells.

The German turned away from the basilica and into the smaller square. He was retreating toward the boats lashed to the piers along the shore of the lagoon as the police sirens grew closer.

Hawk splashed through the water, grabbed Attila by the arm and tried to swing him around, but the other man lashed out and flung his attacker away with tremendous force.

Hitler continued to walk toward the boats.

Picking himself up, Hawk got within two feet of him when he fired the second-to-the-last shot in his gun.

Hitler lurched.

He'd been hit, but he kept walking.

"Mike, wait," Pollock was shouting from behind them.

But this was Michael Hawk's crusade. Stoically he followed his prey through the whipping gale, across the length of the piazzetta to the piers along the shore of the lagoon.

Attila untied his boat and climbed in.

"Kill me!" he taunted Hawk. "Try. You have a bullet left. Shoot. Go ahead. You can't do it, you fool. You can't kill me."

The madman stood in the rocking boat, blood pouring from his chest to be washed away by the rain. He had been critically wounded; yet he remained on his feet.

Hawk waited.

He put out a hand when he heard Pollock coming closer. No need for both of them to flirt with death.

"Shoot him," the CIA man yelled. "Now. We gotta get out of here."

"Kill him," Regina's weaker voice pleaded.

"Try," Attila challenged.

Still Hawk didn't move as his fiendish enemy started the

engine. The bastard was laughing triumphantly. Mike stepped partway onto the pier, finally raising his gun again.

Attila lifted his own weapon as if to defend himself, but he hesitated. Hawk was not aiming at him.

As though he were blinded by the storm, Mike aimed the Dardick with its last plastic case shell well behind its apparent target.

It was crazy, he told himself. There were no such things as demons, monsters. Yet he suddenly believed there was only one way to suppress a phoenix . . . with fire. Attila had to be destroyed the way his father was.

Cremated.

Nothing else would work.

Michael Hawk squeezed the trigger.

The slug smashed through the wood cover and punctured the gasoline tank. Fuel spouted onto the engine.

The explosion knocked Hawk off the pier and into the churning water. Heat singed his face and splinters spiked his body.

When he surfaced the powerboat was an inferno.

In the sinking wreckage was Attila Hitler, his body consumed in flames. For an instant his face was illuminated by the fire that wrapped the rest of his body.

He wasn't screaming. His face was without expression.

Then the face too became part of the wick of a huge burning candle.

He was being cremated like his father. The sole difference—the flames were eating him while he was still alive.

"The only way," Michael Hawk said to himself as George Pollock helped him from the thrashing waters of the lagoon. "The only way."

As they fled ahead of the police, he kept repeating the phrase to himself because reason told him otherwise.

22

In the quiet of the dawn with the storm receding and the first sunlight fingering holes in the clouds, Michael Hawk stood inside the garage in the Piazzale Roma. The bridge separated him from the main islands of Venice where the police would still be trying to sort out the dead floating in the flooded square.

Mike didn't look back. He had the top of the Lamborghini up and one foot inside. George Pollock and Regina Tirelli were near enough for their soft voices to be heard.

"Do you really think he was the son of Hitler?" Pollock pondered aloud. "He didn't form great armies; he didn't go to war; he controlled no country."

"Read your history," Hawk told him. "The Führer's last thoughts were that he should have fostered uprisings, incited the people of other lands to revolt. Those were the tactics he wished he had used. The tactics of his son."

"Why didn't you shoot Attila when you could have?" Regina said bitterly. "You almost let him get away."

Mike let the question go. In the daylight he could not give credence to his emotions of the night before.

Attila was a man, nothing more, he told himself. He didn't have to be cremated like his father. That was nonsense.

And yet . . .

Hawk had not quite convinced himself. Maybe Attila was more than mortal. Maybe his brutality was not just a product of his training. Maybe . . .

Aw, hell, the former reporter thought. He didn't need all the answers any more.

"What are you going to write for your editor?" George Pollock asked.

"The truth," Mike smiled. "It'll blow his mind." Then he glanced at Regina. "Or maybe I'll just write that Gristle Grissen, that lazy sonofabitch, found an old World War II aircraft in the mud of the lagoon and intended to blow it into a big story. I could say he probably spread the word that he had found Nazi treasure aboard and paid with his life for attempting to make the story better."

"What about Count La Scala and all those bodies."

Hawk shrugged. "Let Ceperley and the police figure it out. They'll have a helluva time tying it to me if you and Regina get out of the country fast enough. Cep won't mention my name. He'll need me again someday. Or they can link the whole bloody mess to Grissen and the treasure. I won't write anything until I've got a good place to hide for a while."

"Can't I go with you?" the girl asked. Her hands folded across her middle. Her hair hung straight, but most of her drenched clothes were hidden beneath her raincoat. She didn't look nearly as disheveled as Hawk and Pollock. But then many in Venice would look wet and cold in the beautiful island city today. Not that any of the three would return. Pollock could pull enough strings to get himself and the girl safely out of the country without question. Once she was in the States again, she could fall back on her wealth and her father's old Mafia ties to protect her. "I could be . . . you know . . . I could be pregnant," Regina said pathetically.

She needn't have mentioned it.

All too well Hawk knew she might have been impregnated by Attila. If so, what kind of child would she bear?

Was Attila born to repeat his father's crimes? Was the seed that he sprang from rotten and vile? Or did his rearing by the people in the palace explain the recreation of the dead monster from Berlin?

Mike didn't know.

He couldn't guess what would be born to Regina.

He had considered killing her before any child inside her could begin to grow.

It was not the morality against murder that stopped him; it was the futility of the act.

You couldn't kill evil. A Hitler was a monster somewhat like an octopus, so large you could never strike the head. You could chop off the tentacles that tried to strangle you. Sometimes you escaped, but the beast would soon be devouring someone else.

You tried, that's all you could do. You cut off or burned as much evil as you could.

"I won't have an abortion," she said as if she had read his mind. "It is God's will, whatever."

"Yeah. Whatever."

"Besides," she whispered hopefully, "if I should be pregnant, perhaps it's yours. A few hours difference . . . who knows?"

Michael Hawk closed his eyes. He had come to want a child, but he would never know, and he couldn't stay to find out.

He had to run as far and as fast as he could.

He had to hide.

He touched George Pollock's shoulder. "Take care of her, will you, Georgy Girl?" he asked.

"Sure, Mike."

Hawk did not look at Regina again. He couldn't.

He settled into the seat of the extravagant car and let the cover close over him.

It was as luxurious and as tight as a coffin. But it was the only home he had for the moment.

The powerful engine rumbled, and he backed out of his parking space.

He was on his way again, looking for another place to hide, to rest, to make love, to enjoy his fortune. To forget for a while.

Historical Postscript

Days before Adolf Hitler and his mistress Eva Braun committed suicide in the bunker under the surrounded city of Berlin, two Junker 52 aircraft made miraculous landings in the heart of the besieged capital. Historians pinpoint the date: April 26, 1945. Witnesses report the planes took off later, loaded with wounded. The first plane was historically accounted for. It carried no Nazi leader or loot. The second aircraft's fate was not as well documented. Some thought it crashed. Others felt it might have headed for a port still in Nazi hands such as Venice. If it flew to Venice, it probably arrived there the next day, April 27, the same day Italian partisans unexpectedly wrested the city from the German occupation troops. No one has ever explained why a monster such as Adolf Hitler, who drowned his own wounded to stave off his death by a few hours, would bring in two precious aircraft on a virtual suicide mission, supposedly to save fifty casualties from Berlin where two million suffered the hell of the final inferno.

SPECIAL PREVIEW

Here are the opening scenes
from

HAWK #7
THE DEATH RIDERS

Coming in March!

1

Urgent!

The frantic plea for immediacy was scratched across the number ten white envelope in brazen red letters. A bold, thick stroke of pen underlined them.

International airmail and special-delivery stamps with white and blue arrows of urgency had been affixed to the upper-right-hand corner, one of them cocked as if applied in a terrified rush. Closer to the return address extra stamps sent further distress signals to the mail handlers whose fingers the message had flipped through on its long, meandering odyssey.

"Please Forward Immediately."

The second plea on the bottom-left-hand corner also was underscored. It spoke of life and death.

The original address had been scratched out and another written in. Then another address and another. Postmarks crowded together, tracing the letter's jet trail to Chicago, New York, to Italy, and finally the hot, steaming Caribbean islands.

More postage had been paid along the way.

The plea for haste had aroused men to brief flurries of activity. One receiver dispatched the sealed message by motorized courier. A second forwarded it on the run to the

nearest post office. A third gave up his lunch hour hastening its journey.

Each resented the extra effort. The addressee had won no loving cups among the jaded news-bureau chiefs who played general delivery for the wandering journalist. The unwilling couriers forwarded the letter pragmatically; each was indebted to the receiver. To eschew their tenuous link with him was to sever the thread that sporadically drew floods of front-page banner news from the well of world tears.

They resented him because they admired him.

But the letter's rush had occurred on other days, in other places.

On the sun-washed island of St. Lucia, the pace slowed to a crawl. In the deep valleys filled with orchids, hibiscus, and hundreds of other exotic blooms, the word "urgent" was an anachronism. Such jolts to the tranquility were a jarring and unwelcome discord. The inhabitants moved slowly through the heat, even on banana-ship day when the women heaped the island's principal export onto their heads and transported it to the holds of rusting freighters.

In the village post office the girl behind the steel-barred counter had surreptitiously separated the letter from the mail that had arrived on the afternoon Sun-jet service. A black girl of prodigious grace, she considered herself on a social rung higher than most. Her own mother, though, still haloed her head with a *colta*, a banana fiber ring on which the bent old woman carried tourists' laundry to her washtub at home.

The girl felt superior because she could read. She was the first of her family who could.

The barren building—with its counter and two dozen unlocked, haphazardly numbered boxes. a nonfunctioning electric fan dangling from the ceiling, and one worn wicker chair—was her realm. There she reigned over the twitching dark-skinned Frenchman who came to the office minutes after each day's delivery and laid with her on the floor whenever the mood moved her.

She tolerated him because he came from beyond the village that bored her, because he smiled a lot, and because he moved his body constantly to the rhythm from the transistor radio strapped to an empty belt loop on faded cutoff shorts.

The shorts, the only clothing he wore, bespoke his poverty,

and she treated him as an inferior except when she lost control close to a sexual climax.

Like warm sun and rain he brought life to the post office with its bare wood floor and the smell of dead leaves from the thatch-covered roof.

Today he offended her by picking up the envelope from the counter before she granted permission.

"Ah!" the squirming French islander exclaimed. "*Monsieur* Michael Hawk. *Mon ami*."

He kissed the envelope and pirouetted in anticipation, holding the prize like a golden chalice.

"Here, you Creole Crazy," she cried in English. "Give me dat."

"Eh? Big tip. You want too, *vrai*?"

"*Faux*."

She stretched to grab the letter.

He laughed. He switched to the patois of St. Lucia. "Eh! *Kuté fam-là*."

She had been told to expect the envelope. Dutch guilders had been offered. Violence was the implied reward for failure.

Fear tightened her throat when she failed to retrieve the envelope. The men who had approached her were the cruel, sadistic type, who for pleasure would pin a bug to a table top with the point of a knife.

"Ah, *padoñ*, mah sweet." Flibustier tucked the prize behind his buttocks and danced away.

Near thirty—he lost count of the years—he read little English, a smattering of French, a dash of Caribbean-convoluted Dutch, and a meager vocabulary of Spanish. He had escaped the literacy being imposed insidiously on the scattered specks of land in the warm, somnolent sea.

So the entreaty for haste on the envelope meant nothing to him. The addressee's name, though, was familiar.

Michael Hawk.

It was a clandestine title to him, as mystifying as a magician's wand. It represented sequestered wealth, a pirate's loot buried, buried deep. It conjured images in the slender, anoretic Creole's mind: of generous tips; pleasantly brief periods of casual employment; the mellow oblivion that francs, pounds, pesos, and crisp new dollars could buy; liters of orange-peel rum or a case of strong wine.

Usually a woman less haughty than the educated postmistress was a part of Michael Hawk's strange generosity.

There was more. There was the inexplicable camaraderie between the two very different men. The adhesive that joined them seemed to be the fantasylands in which they lived. Flibustier's mental Disneyland was a product of his own brain—the escape of a brilliant but untrained mind from the doldrums of poverty and the void of illiteracy.

He had no idea whether Hawk's world was real or only an extended joke played with money from a child's game.

The Creole didn't care. The mysterious Hawk was as uninhibited as the sinewy man from St. Martin himself.

Hawk meant fun, friendship, and escape.

The envelope was a ticket to intrude on the generous white man.

Italian stamps pasted over the original American postage meant nothing. His world didn't stretch that far. Nor had he expected the postmistress's violent reaction to his possession of the letter.

She cursed him in the patois of the former British colony and called him "bloody" this and "bloody" that when he escaped into the baking noonday sun. She was still swearing when he swung along the dirt street between the village stores. There was a monotonous sameness about their corrugated roofs, shuttered windows, and unpainted second stories jutting out to provide shade for the broken concrete sidewalks.

"*Au revoir, petite amie*," Flibustier called loud enough to be heard behind the louvered shutters of the silent village.

He was from St. Martin Divided between France and Holland, it lay far to the north along the crescent-shaped archipelago stretching from Florida to the Venezuelan shores. Since he liked everyone to know he was from somewhere else, he spoke mostly Gallic French, although St. Lucia had a split Anglo-Gallic personality. There British bric-a-brac stood among French colonial frame structures, the offspring of incestuous mating between the island's historically alternating rulers.

English was St. Lucia's official language. The people spoke their own blend of Carib (French and African) at home, a dialect the Creole from St. Martin could speak when he wanted.

So he shouted "Farewell, my love" again in Carib.

If anyone heard, no one opened a window.

Sand flies buzzing about his head were the only interruption of the quiet.

Flibustier did not understand the girl's unexpected anger at all. He flitted about regularly, making outrageously sensual suggestions whenever her friends entered the post office. He provided white tourists special-delivery service for tips he and the girl had shared.

The courier service was the latest and least illegal of his petty enterprises.

Why she objected today did not worry him.

"*Faire l'amour*," he cried.

He was growing bored with the business anyway. It tarnished his flamboyant image of himself.

In his mind he was exactly what he called himself, a *flibustier*, a *vrijbuiter* in Dutch, in English a freebooter. Pirate blood streamed hot and fast in his veins. He was a descendant of the infamous female pirate Anny Bonny, he bragged. His ancestors were sired by "Calico Jack" Rackham, Anny's cutthroat shipmate who died on the gallows.

So his mother told him.

"Ah!" he would say. The black strain came through the unique alchemy of pigmentation that created the beautiful *Martiniquaises* of the French Caribbean. Only he explained it in a garbled dialect influenced by his wanderings over a sea salted with islands where new languages were still emerging and brewing in a bouillabaisse of words, slang, and distorted pronunciations.

His Creole mother had been born in Les Trois Ilets on St. Martin near the partially restored home of Napoleon's Josephine, the nineteenth-century empress of all France.

And it was not by error that his last name was the same as that of Bonaparte's wife.

He was Flibustier de Beauharnais, he claimed. True or not he was proud of his prostitute mother's audacity at linking him to Europe's long-deposed royalty. If anyone derisively doubted his lineal claims, he disregarded their cynicism as irreverent envy.

He considered himself doubly endowed. Besides the name he was the reincarnation of a fearless pirate. His ancestors had pillaged galleons until European rulers discovered more

loot in plantations worked by the darker gold of imported slaves.

And Michael Hawk.

Ah, there was a wise man. He would sit by the hour on a luxurious fishing boat listening and believing Flibustier's yarns.

"Flibustier, he comes up the sea on dis yacht *magnifique*," he had related in mangled English last time they met. "West, southwest Nasse-Terre. Me, diesel, she chuggin'. Flibustier, him at dey helm. Yacht she becalmed. Dey man, dey woman on deck. American, ah thinks. Dey woman, she sunnin', body near naked. Dey wavin', ah come alongside. Dey capt'n—dat me—he board wid nothin' but dey four-barrel derringer. Dey cringe like naughty children. Dey capt'n he puts dem adrift in dah skiff, wid eats for a month. He good mon, dat freebooter. But he takes dey yacht. Ah, she's *beauté*. Like woman of Martinique durin' *Vaval* before dey Lent. Ah tows her north by east. Mah diesel, she chuggin' good, knowin's we rich, mah boat and me."

"And where is this yacht and your boat now?" Hawk asked politely.

Flibustier spread his cinnamon-colored arms and made a sad sigh.

"Lost. Dey devil currents in dey Guadloupe Passage, he gets 'em. Ah! Dey fates of a pirate. But 'morrow. Dey capt'n—dat's me—he gets 'nother yacht. Bigger. Prettier'n breasts of dey woman. You see."

The American nodded and made marks on paper that he always seemed to carry, except when he dived in the water, and perhaps when he went to bed with one of the many women Flibustier had seen him with during the dozen or so times the two had met.

Hawk was a writer or had been once, the Creole knew that, but the American had reappeared on St. Lucia this last time without his typewriter in tow. He was different, this wise, friendly man who disappeared and reappeared on the islands like occasional breezes on a still hot day.

In the earlier years Hawk had been impressed by the modern shops with glass and aluminum exteriors in Castries, the island's main city. The town had been cauterized by fire twice within a couple of years, but Hawk didn't mention the squalor reinfecting the fringes. He also ignored the contrast-

ing white mansions on the hillsides and the million-dollar sailboats in the harbor.

Hawk had been one with the people.

This trip he had changed. He employed Flibustier to ward off boys nagging him to toss quarters into the murky water of the bay. Hawk gave handfuls of dollars for his friend to disperse without making the boys dive into the pollution. Yet he didn't stay to talk and josh with the kids who had trailed him in the days when he didn't have a dime to share.

The writer was different in other ways too. He received no mail. The letter today was only the second for him this trip.

Hawk seemed aloof to his old haunts. He no longer visited women he had known in houses where laundry hung from the windows; he kicked at the pigeons picking at the cracks in the potholed streets; and he grew irritable when he stumbled on sidewalks with unexpected dips and rises.

He had come to St. Lucia several months before, but Flibustier still had to bring him bottled water. He didn't walk or hitch rides anymore. Now the Creole had to haggle with quarrelsome cab drivers to take them from the major resorts to the village near the foot of the twin Pitons, which thrust green mounds at the blue and white sky.

Flibustier had chosen the Cloud's Head Resort of Bieu Fort near the southern tip of the island for his friend, although it was far from the fun places they had once shared. The hotel itself was a dozen rooms in a wooden building with partitions serving as walls. But Hawk chose the more expensive cottages at nearby Beane Field Beach.

"Dis place, she too quiet," Flibustier had commented. "You ears go deaf, how you tell?"

"It's fine," Hawk had said.

In earlier times the writer had had no interest in seclusion.

The two had met on Martinique during Carnival right after the New Year hangover. Hawk had mixed like a native in the masquerades, the singing, the dancing in the streets. On Ash Wednesday he had masked himself grotesquely like everyone else. Then he joined the final ballet of the extended Mardi Gras funeral cortege that paraded behind clarinets and trumpets to the yellow and red pyre of flickering flames and dancing shadows.

Michael Hawk and the self-proclaimed descendant of a pirate wench had wakened to Lent in the same littered doorway.

They had been friends ever since, whenever their paths could be made to cross.

But the American had changed. He was richer. He was different.

Flibustier danced up the rise in the dusty road with the letter in his teeth. It was his dagger; a stick was his sword.

There was a bounce of anticipation in his step although he followed the narrow road graded up one side of the steep hill and down the other. The cliff fell away into the sea, and the sun would glare at him all the way; still he grinned at the prospect of seeing his white friend again.

"Ship ahoy, man dah mains'l." He fenced with imaginary merchant seamen as he walked, remembering snippets of dialogue from a film he had once seen.

So he didn't hear the motorcycle's varoom until it was almost upon him.

When he did hear, the sound was the rumble of a cannon to his imaginative brain.

He whirled, stick at the ready, to see the chrome and red enamel Kawasaki with long stroke front suspension aimed directly at him, the driver hunched behind the wind screen. The helmeted head and visored face were hidden from view. Gloves concealed the hands.

Flibustier assumed the rider was black.

He must be a slave pressed into the service of the enemy. Attacking. In the tenuous world where the Creole stole and connived for a living, battles with fists and knives were as common and vicious as in the packs of any predatory animal. His first reaction was fear. That was nature's signal to prepare every nerve, bone, and muscle for survival.

Stumbling sideways, Flibustier headed for the top of the incline. To his left the hillside had been shaved nearly to the perpendicular when the road was graded by the British. A mat of bougainvillea fell in a cascade of red down the embankment to the road, its gnarled mass of thorny vines offering sanctuary to the unofficial courier. He thrust his hands into the redness and clawed his way upward. Surprisingly the slender withes supported his weight; it was the earth that failed him.

A great wreath pulled away from the moist soil, letting him topple backward to the pebble-covered road. The motorcycle surged through six gears as it obtained the speed needed for a thirteen-second quarter mile.

"Eh!" he yelled.

He was confused between the reality of a weighty, powerful machine driving at him hard and his imaginary battle of the Spanish main.

He rolled.

The cycle narrowly missed his head and torso, running over his hand. It left gray clawlike tread marks across his skin.

He could almost ignore the pain in the exultation of survival. He swung the stick as if it were truly a sword. The attack, he thought, was some friend's joke. Or revenge by a man whose woman he had taken. Freebooters made enemies.

The bike skidded in a shrieking U-turn less than twenty yards up the road. Trailing a bridal train of vines, it shot toward him again with a blip of the throttle.

The Creole from St. Martin remembered who he was, a descendant of pirates and the empress of France. The motorcycle rider became a British privateer swinging aboard his ancestor's galleon.

Flibustier, knife of paper still in his mouth, reveled in the game. He swayed side to side, forcing the cyclist to choose which way the target would jump.

At the last second the agile Frenchman chose the left. He leaped, extended his uninjured hand with its willowy sword, and attempted to cut his assailant across the throat.

The bike, though, whisked past, made another U-turn and a third adroit drive at the weaving target.

"*Libertatia*!" Flibustier shouted another word he had discovered during his unstructured research into the time of skull and crossbones.

His bravado wavered when he spotted a second cycle churning up the hill. His sweeping gaze assessed the situation.

L'embouteillage, he thought. There was a bottleneck now, and he was caught in the throat.

Returning to the village would be impossible. The second cyclist blocked the route. Continuing up the road to Michael Hawk's hotel was impractical too. The grade was steep and Flibustier was in no condition to outrun a powerful machine. The bougainvillea-covered hillside would not hold his weight—this left only one direction in which to flee: down the cliff toward the sea. There was a footpath, Flibustier recalled. But the foliage between it and the road was thick with creepers

and scrub trees that might tangle a man in a net of growth. He must bull his way through the vegetation, being careful not to miss the path and plunge to the bottom where the sea washed the island. There giant boulders absorbed the untiring onslaught of fierce, foaming surf.

Yet if he plunged off the edge of the road now, and if the cyclist were armed with a flintlock pistol, the foliage would still imprison the modern-day freebooter when his assailant had braked to a stop.

Besides, the alternative appealed to Flibustier. In the face of totally unexpected, completely incomprehensible attack, he had a buccaneer's derring-do, a devil-may-care fascination with violence and death. He grinned while the bike sped closer.

Then Flibustier played his game.

He pretended panic. He staggered, fell, rose on his hands and knees, and floundered at the very edge of the precipice. A nudge would send him hurtling off the cliff. At best he could hope to be caught in the green fingers of the jungle branches instead of splattering against the rocks.

He pulled the envelope from his mouth and screamed, "No, please, suh, don't," He repeated it in the local dialect. "*Non, mèsi, su plè.*"

The bike plowed toward him.

Using body English, he spun. He slid. He caught the handlebar that barely missed him.

The crucial swerve that the cyclist intended to make never happened. Flibustier's grasp was enough to keep the front wheel straight a split second too long.

The scion of pirates and royalty was too busy keeping himself from plunging straight down the cliff to see the expensive bike launch itself from the road. But he saw it in midair. It was a slender-winged bird. It sailed, colorful as a flamingo from the Dutch island of Bonaire, over the foliage and arched slowly, gracefully downward. Partway, rider and bike parted company.

The gloved hands clawed the air before machine and man smashed the rocks below. One crackled and exploded. One splattered like a ripe melon dropped by boys running from a forbidden patch.

Flibustier had no feeling for his squashed assailant, al-

though questions swarmed in on him as he withdrew from his world of make-believe adventure.

Necessity pushed the questions from his mind. The second bike was rapidly approaching.

Afraid again, he threw his body against the thick tangle of oleander, roses, lilies, and blooming shrubs clinging to the cliff. Pampas grass sliced his body like long razor blades; thorns ripped and chunked his skin. Leaves cut at his eyes and caught in his mouth. Branches embraced him. Grimly determined, he fought to the narrow path that ran along the cliffside.

He slipped, slid off the path, and caught a limb before he made the final plunge. He dragged himself up when he heard the second bike on the road above him.

The engine stopped.

The rider must be listening, Flibustier decided. He again considered returning to the village, but the enemy could be someone in authority.

Find Hawk, the cinnamon-colored Creole told himself.

The American would know what to do. He would help. The former writer avoided authorities too and evaded questions.

If anyone would help, it would be Hawk.

Besides Flibustier still had the letter that he had taken from the post office for delivery.

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